

Say His Name
Fifth Sunday of Easter
May 2, 2021
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Text: Acts 8:26-40

Since that passage from Acts was the first passage read this morning, let's go back and do a little review- nothing complicated – we'll start easy – but no looking at the scripture passage, OK?! - what was the name of the person who it says is directed by the Spirit to 'go south of town' – to the wilderness road? If your answer was Philip, then you are correct! But the next question is more challenging: do you know who Philip is? And if your answer is '1 of the 12 disciples of Jesus'...then you are...BUZZ: wrong!! – just like I would have been wrong if you would have asked me before this week. Yes – there IS a Philip in the Gospels who is 1 of the 12 disciples, and whenever I came across this story in Acts 8, I figured that's who this Philip was. But on further review, this is a different Philip – someone you hear about just a couple chapters earlier in Acts 6: we're told that the early church is growing in Jerusalem, so the disciples appoint some Deacons to help with care and support for this peculiar new association of people – followers of the risen Jesus; and Philip is one of those appointed Deacons.

Alright – so that's Philip; next question is more difficult: what is the name of the Ethiopian official who Philip comes across south of town? – the other character in that Acts 8 story. Do you know? – or do you know that this is a trick question?! – because in this Acts 8 story we are never given the name of this other person. We're told this person is an Ethiopian; an official of the Ethiopian Queen, in charge of the treasury. But we're not told his name. Although we are told that this person is a eunuch; in fact after hearing he is an Ethiopian official, then eunuch is all we hear: the eunuch, the eunuch, the eunuch - the story says again and again.

I thought I would ease into this sermon in a more light-hearted way – a little quiz about names – because I knew that things would need to take a much more serious tone when we turn ourselves to say - dare I say, to feel - what a eunuch is. Because ‘eunuch’ is a polite-for-conversation term for an awful reality. This was a person intentionally mutilated at a young age – mutilated in order to prevent sexual development – with the purpose that this person could be around women in the royal court. No wonder it’s more polite to say eunuch than ‘person intentionally and inalterably castrated in order to serve the purposes of the wealthy and powerful’ – enough to make you cringe in your body, heart and soul.

And this person – the eunuch – this person ‘intentionally and inalterably castrated in order to serve the purposes of the wealthy and powerful’, is sitting in a chariot on a deserted road south of Jerusalem, reading the Hebrew scriptures – not your typical story scenario. But what scholars will tell you is that during the time of the Roman Empire, the Jewish faith and scriptures had dispersed – and some like this eunuch from northern Africa would travel to Jerusalem to worship there – a huge journey to undertake – and now he was heading home. So that sounds good, right? – that he could worship God in Jerusalem? – but the thing is, even with this trip to Jerusalem, being a eunuch was what defined him. There were ritual purity prohibitions against a eunuch entering the temple – which seems especially cruel: because of what *others* did to him, HE is seen as unclean. Even this adopted faith is not a release from a mutilated life.

But while in Jerusalem, it seems this eunuch was able to purchase a passage of Hebrew scripture – written on papyrus to take home with him. And just by chance (which is to say – not by chance at all!), the passage is from Isaiah, chapter 53 – the vivid description of one who suffers humiliation at the hands of others – one to whom justice

is denied and from whom life is stolen. This is what the eunuch is reading when Philip comes along – this is what the eunuch asks Philip to help him understand – and this is when the Eunuch asks Philip a most poignant question: ‘is the prophet talking about himself or someone else?’ It’s so poignant because either answer is OK - the Eunuch just yearns to know who it is who speaks HIS story in sacred scripture! – who is this who makes his reality, his pain, to be seen? It doesn’t matter if it’s the prophet or someone else- this eunuch marvels that in sacred scripture he can see himself, he is seen.

But then let’s get a little more poignant – because what is so essential in this Acts 8 story, but that is way too easy to miss, is what Philip’s answer is. ‘Is the prophet talking about himself or someone else?’ – Philip’s answer is that these words of the prophet are not just about another person, but for followers of the Risen Jesus these images are fulfilled in Jesus Christ as God with us. This is not just that the eunuch can identify with another person- as incredibly powerful as that would be; this is that GOD is identifying with the eunuch – this is God in Christ embracing the kind of pain that literally marked this eunuch’s life. When Acts 8 says that Philip tells ‘the good news about Jesus’, that is what the good news is for this eunuch through this Hebrew scripture; this is what causes the eunuch when he spots some water to say: ‘any reason I shouldn’t baptized?’ – really asking: ‘am I - is my body - still excluded?’ – and Philip baptizes him. And ‘the eunuch went on his way rejoicing.’ (Philip finds himself miles away at Azotus – but we’re not going to deal with that!).

So let’s take a moment and get our bearings. And let’s say something that could be said after getting to this point. What we could say is: ‘look how this Ethiopian official, a eunuch, found a ray of hope in the Jewish faith, but was ultimately still excluded; but then Christianity came along and finally welcomed him all the way: mixed reviews for

Judaism and yay for Christianity!' Let's take a moment and NOT say that! – although some kind of Christian supercessionism, an attitude of Christian superiority over other faiths is said far too often.

So let's get our bearings again, and wonder instead about this: I wonder how much of the prophet Isaiah the eunuch had read? – and in fact I am going to believe that right then, or at some point, he had the opportunity to read a bit further past Isaiah 53 to Isaiah 56, to read this:

Let not the eunuch say, "Behold, I am a dry tree." For thus says the Lord, "To the eunuchs I will give My house and will give them a name better than that of sons and daughters; an everlasting name which will not be cut off. (Isaiah 56:3-5)

Wow! – can you imagine him reading that?! - remarkable to discover what is in scripture.

So let's say this – that within faith traditions, there are threads of both salvation and oppression; there are ways faith in God strives toward justice and is warped toward injustice; used toward inclusion and exclusion. Those contrasting threads can be seen in this story for Jewish faith and practice – but the eunuch finds in the Hebrew scripture a word that opens him to God's presence. And then what is important for us as followers of Jesus is not to see some sort of superiority in this story, but to realize how the church falters after this marvelous story. The church too soon and too often became a place where bodies and sexualities and identities different than the norm were ostracized and demonized. Acts 8 has become for the Queer community such an important story – not because Queer bodies are broken, but because they have been broken and done injustice by the Church; and here is a story of God present with those who are treated with such injustice. Here in this story too this person is a Black body, from Northern Africa – and as in recent centuries in our culture the Black body has

been done injustice, has been maimed for the sake of the wealthy and powerful – and so the theology of the Black experience hears this story as one of dignity and empowerment for Black bodies. In this story the good news on that day continues to challenge us this day – continues to challenge the injustice and exclusion that faith too often has embodied. Acts 8 – a story for Queer and Black theology to bless all of us. Amazing.

Which leads me to want to marvel with you that this Acts 8 story is here as a gospel story at all. If you think about it, why is this story even here? – there is nothing connected to it before and after. So what has often happened is this story is coopted into the triumphal narrative of Christianity taking over the world – to Ethiopia and beyond! But that is not this story at all! Now I know that it can be problematic to use a single story as the essence of the gospel, but with this one I think I might! This is a resurrection story not because it serves the purpose of conquering the world for Christ – but because it is the Spirit of the Risen Christ who calls together Philip and the eunuch; to meet that eunuch’s own yearning for life and hope – and to meet ours too. Just listen to this story, and then you tell me what the good news is about: this is a person who has suffered deep injustice, who finds his story embraced in scripture; this is Philip saying that the good news is that God is among us in Jesus to bring life and love and hope; this is the story of someone for whom the waters of baptism are inclusion and wholeness and belonging; this is a story in which the suffering that a warped church has brought on Queer and Black bodies, is instead used by those bodies to bring justice and inclusive community back into the light for the church; this is a story not about just the suffering of others, but about mine and yours too – a story in which the Spirit calls to your brokenness – to your pain – and says that God is with you – that you are known and seen. THIS is the good news. Amazing!

So let's get our bearings again, south of Jerusalem – and conclude with 2 things. One is to ponder the conclusion of this Acts 8 story itself, which tells us 'the eunuch went on his way rejoicing.' Because as long as we are delving honestly into the painful reality of this eunuch, then we need to ask: what is joy about here? His body was not healed; he would continue to serve the powerful - what has changed? – rejoicing? Let's not hear this as some topical joy ointment meant to smooth over and mollify something difficult; no – there is indeed a deep and powerful and life-giving joy in knowing that God is with us in the midst of life's realities; this eunuch did now carry in his body a resurrection life that claimed his whole self as known and loved by God. There is powerful joy in that – essential even when brokenness continues.

But such is not the joy of justice – and so the last step of this story is for the Spirit to call us to bring justice for the Eunuch even now. The justice that comes in saying his name – did you hear that remarkable promise in Isaiah 56? – *God will give the eunuch an everlasting name.* Well, the Ethiopian Church, already in the 2nd century, says 'this eunuch has a name: "Bochas" – say his name: Bochas. Why is it important to say, to claim, peoples' names in the face of injustice and suffering? – "say his name: George Floyd' – to say the names of people outside of the expressed norm of gender and identity, of ability and race? – we say their names because we go beyond the story of Acts 8, as the Spirit calls us to justice; we reject the trajectory of calling someone 'the eunuch, the eunuch, the eunuch...' – no – say his name: Bochas. We go beyond unjust characterizations of those put outside the oppressive norm and say their names – say that their stories are embraced by God and that they bring us all more deeply into justice and joy.

Where is the Spirit calling us today? – calling you? To a place where you can hear someone's story of pain and tell them the resurrection good news that God gives life in

brokenness, and that God knows their name; to a space where you can believe that God hears your story of pain, the good news that the God of life knows your name; to a place of joy in the good news of Jesus Christ that moves us toward justice. To say his name: Bochas; to say their names. AMEN.

Sources consulted:

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- <http://www.meetinghouse.xyz/everything/2017/3/23/the-mystery-of-the-ethiopian-eunuch>
- *Feasting on the Word, Year B, Volume 2*