

## 5.2.21

### Vicar Paul

I would like for you to close your eyes. Alright. No sneaking. Imagine an ancient map of Israel during the time of Jesus' ministry. You might have seen these in the New Revised Standard lectionary or maybe one of your favorite study Bibles. What do you see? Maybe some cities. Some places and countries. Close your eyes and think. You may open your eyes. What did you see during this exercise? Did somebody see certain towns or countries or maybe empires or anything?

Most of the time when you look at a map of Jesus' ministry you see Rome in the center in the Roman Empire that sort of spans the Mediterranean Sea. And very often you miss Egypt, where Moses came out of. And then you barely see the rest of the continent of Africa. And one country that is continually missed usually on these maps is Ethiopia. And it's important, I think, that we understand Ethiopia's history in the story of this eunuch. This is one of my favorite biblical stories in Acts. Because we've repeatedly missed the conversion of actually Philip, not the eunuch. It seems as though the eunuch does most of the work in this morning's text and Philip was just along in the chariot for a free ride.

And so this morning we find ourselves on that road to Gaza in the wilderness. The desert wilderness. And the Ethiopian eunuch was riding in the chariot in Samaria, and Philip encounters eunuch who is reading from the prophet Isaiah on his way back from Jerusalem, and there's been sort of debate in the theological community about whether he was Gentile, or maybe he was Jewish. And we're not sure exactly where he falls, where the eunuch falls. Because Ethiopia has a long history with both Judaism and Christianity. If we go back to the Hebrew scriptures, Queen Sheba and King Solomon have a relationship, and they have their son Menilek. And as a gift, King Solomon gives queen Sheba the port access in Gaza, so it makes sense as to why the eunuch is on the road to Gaza.

Ethiopia at that time was a profitable kingdom. And they were pretty well off. But we oftentimes don't see that. Because our Western minds have made us assume that when the colonization of Africa happened in the 1800s that we brought Jesus to the people. But the reality is Thomas and Philip had already done that work. They had already started to proselytize the Gentiles. Thomas goes to Southeast Asia. Philip goes to the continent of Africa. And there's oftentimes, particularly in India and in Ethiopia, there's sort of a separate bit of Israel; they're sort of descendants from the seven tribes. And so there's this deep history between Ethiopia and Judaism and later on in Christianity. A lot of our roots are based in Ethiopia.

But the book of Acts chronicles this journey, this pilgrimage. After Jesus's ascension in a couple of weeks, the word starts to travel. It goes to Rome and Assyria. And as I mentioned, Thomas and Philip expand the Empire, the word. And this spirit drove Philip to Samaria. And Judeans and Samaritans don't get along very well. There was oftentimes a contentious history between the two. But in this text, Philip is transformed; the eunuch's identity is seen. A eunuch, I have to explain a eunuch, and I'm gonna try to use G-rated language. Eunuchs were oftentimes not in

the line of succession, they were oftentimes siblings of the person who was eventually going to be king or queen. And this happened in a lot of empires, but oftentimes their body parts were castrated or removed. So it's important to understand that the eunuch has a lot of symbol and power.

This was very common, but in this conversation with Philip, the eunuch's humanity is restored. The eunuch's humanity and lived experience was praised. Philip converts the Ethiopian eunuch and reminds God's faithful people that the kingdom of God is an expansive kingdom. I did a thanksgiving for baptism earlier this morning because I wanted us to remember our baptism. I love that the eunuch says, "hey there's water over there, what stops me from being baptized?" What stops us from being baptized? In our baptisms we are marked and sealed with the cross of Christ. We are made in Christ's image, and we are called to reflect that as disciples of Christ. to go into this world, this complicated and broken world, and to bring that sense of hope and that everlasting life. That when we were young, maybe our children, our grandchildren, we remember that day when they, maybe even remember for ourselves, the day we were baptized. That no matter our shortcomings or failings, we are given this gift of grace. We are reminded of Christ's life. We are transformed.

As you leave today, I invite you to stop by the baptismal font and make a sign of the cross. And maybe if you're watching and you haven't been baptized, speak with myself or Pastor Barb, and maybe in a future day when we come back together, we can baptize folks. But remember that you are marked as Christ's child, beloved child. And you are called in this world, to bring that hope in that everlasting life that we are constantly reminded of each and every Sunday. So I invite you on your way out to make a sign of the cross to remind yourself.

Amen.