

## **Sermon on April 28, 2024, Rev. Tori Sumner**

Acts 8:26-40: *Then 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.) So he got up and went. Now there was an Ethiopian eunuch, a court official of the Candace, the queen of the Ethiopians, in charge of her entire treasury. The eunuch had come to Jerusalem to worship and were returning home; seated in their chariot, they were reading the prophet Isaiah. Then the Spirit said to Philip, "Go over to this chariot and join it." So Philip ran up to it and heard them reading the prophet Isaiah. He asked, "Do you understand what you are reading?" They replied, "How can I, unless someone guides me?" And they invited Philip to get in and sit beside them. Now the passage of the scripture that they were 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.  
In his humiliation justice was denied him.  
Who can describe his generation?  
For his life is taken away from the earth."*

*The eunuch asked Philip, "About whom, may I ask you, does the prophet say this, about himself or about someone else?" Then Philip began to speak, and starting with this scripture he proclaimed to them 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?" They commanded the chariot to stop, and both of them, Philip and the eunuch, went down into the water, and Philip baptized them. When they came up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord snatched Philip away; the eunuch saw him no more and went on their way rejoicing. But Philip found himself at Azotus, and as he was passing through the region he proclaimed the good news to all the towns until he came to Caesarea.*

Is the Gospel actually good news?

Okay, I know this is a bit of a “hot take” question to start a sermon with, but I actually think it’s a very important question for us to ask ourselves—especially in the season of Easter. We have preached the good news of Jesus’ resurrection. We have watched the disciples rejoice that perhaps death was not as final as they thought it was. We have listened as they spread the Gospel throughout the surrounding towns and countryside.

And perhaps it’s worth asking: What is that Gospel, exactly? We know the word Gospel literally means “good news,” so we know that whatever the disciples are preaching is supposed to be good and exciting and full of joy to those who are hearing it for the first time. And it’s meant to be good and exciting and full of joy to those of us hearing it today, too.

But for me, even before I had reached the age of double digits, I had begun to ask myself this question: Is the Gospel actually good news?

Because the Gospel that I had heard mostly felt scary and threatening. That Gospel went something like this: Because you, little child, are so bad and sinful, Jesus had to suffer and die to pay for your sins. But here’s the good news: If you believe in Jesus, you don’t have to go to hell!

And that message is even harder for a little gay kid who believes that something about them is inherently sinful—something that needs to be excised out, or they will be locked out of heaven.

This is a familiar version of the Gospel to others, right? Even if it’s couched in nicer language, those elements are still there. You don’t believe what we believe, or do what we do? You won’t be welcomed into the kingdom of God. Good news, right?

I want us to hold this question—*is the Gospel actually good news*—in our minds as we hear the story from Scripture today. Because here, in Acts

chapter eight, we witness someone receiving the good news of the Gospel for the first time. The story begins with Philip, one of the early apostles, getting a strange nudge from the Holy Spirit: *Leave town and go out into the wilderness, onto a deserted road headed toward Gaza, in the overwhelming heat of the day.* It is the least likely place for Philip to encounter a crowd who might want to hear the good news of the Gospel. But still, he goes.

And strangely, in the haze of the desert sun, Philip sees: a beautiful, gilded chariot, trotting along at a decent speed, with a person seated in it reading a scroll. And not just any scroll: the scroll of Isaiah, Philip's own religious text!

The Holy Spirit nudges Philip again: *go over to that chariot and join it.* Obediently Philip runs to catch up. Without introduction, panting and out of breath, perhaps not even yet closely looking at this person's face, Philip asks: "Do you understand what you're reading?"

The chariot slows, and the person inside—an Ethiopian eunuch—looks at him and invites him to join. From the information we have, we can imagine that this person is dark-skinned and small, not a woman, but not a fully developed man either.

How do we know this? While "eunuch" isn't a term we use very often anymore, it refers to a person who does not fit society's gender norms. Sometimes these were people born intersex, but usually eunuchs were people born male who were castrated for political reasons. Because they were infertile, they could work in royal women's chambers without being seen as a threat.

Culturally eunuchs were seen as not fully men, but not female either; if they were castrated before puberty, they developed differently than other adults around them. They were seen as weak, effeminate, and subordinate.

So we know, right from the get-go: Philip is sitting next to a person who looks very different from him, a person who—while holding a high position in a royal court—has experienced being a social outcast. A person who has been looked over as others get married and build families. A person who, visiting the temple in Jerusalem, was certainly stared at as someone who looked visibly different and couldn't be easily placed into the categories of male or female, Jew or Greek. A person who only has the job they have because they are seen as weak and non-threatening. A person who doesn't belong.

Many of us have experienced that feeling in different ways. Perhaps it is also because of our race or ethnicity. Perhaps it is because we also are seen as sexually other, or as transgressing the gender categories that uphold so much of our social life. Perhaps it is just because we don't live up to the norms and expectations of society around us—not man enough, not woman enough, too different, too single, too lonely, too other.

Recently I was chatting with another pastor, a Black man, who told me the story of receiving his first call back in the nineties. It was to a small, Methodist church where less than twenty usually came to worship on Sunday. The previous pastor heard that this young Black man had been hired to lead the congregation and was immediately upset. He spoke about him with racial slurs and reached out to former members of the church, asking them to show up on the new pastor's first Sunday in order to protest his installment.

So when this new pastor showed up that first Sunday, this shrinking church was full: Full of current members and his friends, yes, but also full of former members, people who were there because they had been told to protest.

Honestly I can't imagine more of a nightmare scenario. People showing up on your first day, on purpose, to demonstrate that you are not welcome! To protest your existence, your otherness; to proclaim that you do not belong.

I wonder if the eunuch has had experiences like this too. If they, like many Black people, faced others trying to keep them out of places of worship or business or community. If they, like many queer people, have had people verbally harass them in the street. If they, like many gender-nonconforming people, have been the target of physical violence emerging from hate and fear.

It is not surprising that the eunuch is reading the particular passage from Isaiah included in this story. It describes almost exactly their own experience of social isolation and difference:

“Like a lamb silent before its shearer, so he does not open his mouth. In his humiliation justice was denied him.”

So, too, the eunuch has experienced physical and emotional violence and injustice and powerlessness. So they ask: Who is this passage about?

And Philip tells him about Jesus, who experienced violence and injustice so brutal it killed him, who defeated the power of death. And the eunuch, elated, sees water along the side of the road, and exclaims:

“Look, here is water! What is to prevent me from being baptized?”

Surely the eunuch—and Philip!--know that there is a whole list of things that could prevent them from being baptized. Their racial difference.

Their sexual difference. Their failure to live up to gender norms. The fact that eunuchs, according to Deuteronomy, weren't allowed in the temple. Also the fact that the eunuch has not learned all the doctrines, has not made a statement of faith, has not uttered a specific prayer, has never set foot inside a church.

What could prevent the eunuch from being baptized? Any of these things could lead Philip to say that the eunuch doesn't belong. That they should spend more time studying Scripture first. That they should try to be more "normal" first.

Surely there is a part of the eunuch that thinks: This might be another moment where I am turned away. Where I am told, this good news does not extend to you.

But instead, Philip and the eunuch hop out of the chariot, and run down to the water, and Philip baptizes them right then and there. No questions asked.

For the eunuch, the good news of the Gospel is: they are included. There is nothing to prevent them from being baptized. The Holy Spirit moving in the book of Acts fully embraces them for who they are.

My colleague, this Black pastor who turned up on his first Sunday to find a sanctuary full of people who weren't quite ready to welcome him—he didn't realize those people were there to protest. He just assumed the church was full. And so he went ahead and preached the good news, with confidence, with love.

In the end, no one protested. In fact, many of them came back the next Sunday. The Spirit moved, and the church grew, and he led them in many faithful years of ministry.

What other explanation can there be for both of these stories than the powerful moving of the Holy Spirit? It is the Holy Spirit that moves us to widen our boundaries, to embrace the outsiders, to welcome all who have been pushed to the margins. It is the Holy Spirit who throws open the doors wide and says: *Welcome. You belong here. There is nothing to prevent you from being baptized. There is nothing to prevent you from coming in. This is your home too.*

For me, this is the good news of the Gospel. That for those of us who are used to being discriminated against, to being misgendered, to being told we aren't wanted—in God's house, we are wanted. There is nothing that can prevent us from entering. From belonging fully, as we are.

The good news of the Gospel is that it throws wide open the doors to all who have been locked out. It welcomes in those who have been told they don't belong—Black people, and queer people, and trans people, and women, and immigrants, and foreigners. It says to those who have been victims of violence: you are not alone; Jesus suffered too. It cries out against the injustice done to the powerless, such as the systematic killing of those in Gaza who have faced over two hundred days of bombing and death. It calls to all who are wandering alone on wilderness roads and offers them companionship and living water to quench their thirst.

The good news says to us, over and over, no matter who we are or where we come from: There is nothing to prevent you from being baptized. There is nothing to prevent you from being part of this family. God wants you too.

May the Gospel be to us actually good news. May it be water that satisfies the places of thirst in our lives. May it be a companion joining us on the road saying you, too, belong. Amen.





