

Sermon May 2 2021 Terry Yasuko Ogawa A Baptized and Baptizing Community

SCRIPTURE: Acts 8:26-40

26 Then an angel of the Lord said to Philip, 'Get up and go towards the south to the road that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza.' (This is a wilderness road.) 27 So 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 28 and was returning home; seated in his chariot, he was reading the prophet Isaiah. 29 Then the Spirit said to Philip, 'Go over to this chariot and join it.' 30 So Philip ran up to it and heard him reading the prophet Isaiah. He asked, 'Do you understand what you are reading?' 31 He replied, 'How can I, unless someone guides me?' And he invited Philip to get in and sit beside him. 32 Now 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. 33 In his humiliation justice was denied him. Who can describe his generation? For his life is taken away from the earth.' 34 The eunuch asked Philip, 'About whom, may I ask you, does the prophet say this, about himself or about someone else?' 35 Then Philip began to speak, and starting with this scripture, he proclaimed to him the good news about Jesus. 36 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?' 38 He commanded the chariot to stop, and both of them, Philip and the eunuch, went down into the water, and Philip baptized him. 39 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 his way rejoicing. 40 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.

SERMON:

Dear First Congregational Church of the United Church of Christ, Stockbridge, how good it is to be with you! I bring you greetings on behalf of the Southern New England Conference and Rev. Darrell Goodwin, our Executive Conference Minister; Rev. Dr. Audrey Price, our Executive Minister for Strategic Operations; and our entire Area Conference Minister Team.

I hear from your pastor Rev. Brent Damrow that you have been exploring the book of Acts during the Easter season to take a closer look at how the formation of that beloved community of apostles might give you thoughts on how to re-form your own church community as you regather and strengthen your connections in the midst of these ongoing challenges and new opportunities.

This Sunday we will spend some time basking in the story of the Ethiopian eunuch. And though Pastor Brent is covering the first part of the passage in children's time, I do think it is worth it to notice where the story begins: with an angel calling to Philip. When angels show up, we know our worlds are about to shift. So it is with Philip. "Get up and go toward the south to the road that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza," the angel says, and then we are told: "(This is a wilderness road.)"

The Wilderness is an amazing and recurring theme throughout the Bible. Moses finds the burning bush there and then leads the Jews wandering in it for years in search for a promised land. John the Baptist comes out of the wilderness to begin his ministry of baptizing people in the Jordan. Jesus is sent into it right after his own baptism to endure tests of temptation. It is as it is named: a wild place. Anything can happen! And when we are called there, surely it will not be fun, but if we choose to take the journey, there is one thing that is without a doubt: we will emerge changed, if we only engage the lessons therein.

But sometimes the wilderness road is not a choice—it chooses us. When Pastor Brent and I last worked together on a service, it was the Southern New England Conference’s observance marking one year of wandering in the wilderness that is the Covid-19 pandemic. Sometimes when we are in the wilderness, as Brent’s ritual that night reminded us, it is all we can do to remember to breathe, or even to catch a breath. Though we are also reminded that with every breath, God is with us also. But even in the wilderness of grief, disorientation, and sorrow, God can be at work. In fact, when our systems are dismantled, we are invited to emerge from the usual, well-worn paths we have tread to encounter different ways of being and seeing. Sometimes, that’s when God does God’s best work with us.

Philip is about to undertake a journey of, truly, Biblical proportions! And he puts up no fight—we are told of Philip’s response, “So he got up and went.” Along the wilderness road, Philip encounters an Ethiopian eunuch, which is a castrated man, for those unfamiliar with the term. It is commonly understood that eunuchs served in the ancient Near East as keepers of a royal harem and were often highly placed officials. But recent scholarship is more willing to hold the multiple identities of this person in relation to the cultures of the time.

Brittany Wilson writes: “There is a widespread assumption in Acts’ scholarship that the Ethiopian eunuch is an elite official who reflects Luke’s larger interest in high-status individuals. Such an assumption, however, overlooks the inextricable connection between status, gender and ethnicity in the Greco-Roman world, and how the eunuch’s repeated designation as ‘the eunuch’ would have affected his status in particular. ... Overall, the eunuch is an ambiguous figure who embodies the boundary-crossing nature of the gospel itself.” (*Brittany E. Wilson, “‘Neither Male nor Female’: The Ethiopian Eunuch in Acts 8.26–40*,” New Testament Studies 60, no. 3 (July 2014): 403–422.*)

Gifford Charles Alphaeus Rhamie’s recent doctoral work at Canterbury Christ Church University engages the question, “Why cannot the Ethiopian eunuch... be a Jew?” He writes: “Upon examination of the first commentators, i.e., the early Church Fathers, the Ethiopian eunuch’s ethno-religious agency is discovered to have shifted from an Afro-Asiatic Jewish one to a Graeco-Gentile one. The anti-Jewish discourse of the time... functioned... to aid and abet the Church Fathers’ biblical interpretations to achieve this particular religious-political ideal type. In more recent years, a Eurocentric, Cartesian gaze, framed by the logics of Euro-modernity, has largely identified the Ethiopian eunuch along the spectrum of a Graeco-Roman Gentile to a not-quite-a-Jew. ...Essentially, the imperial, racialised imagination cannot recognise him as a Jew because he is African, because he is black. In the final analysis, the dissertation asserts that ‘Black lives matter’ for Jewishness in the book of Acts and for Christian origins.” (*Gifford Charles Alphaeus Rhamie, “Whiteness, Conviviality and Agency: The Ethiopian Eunuch (Acts 8:26-40) and Conceptuality in the Imperial Imagination of Biblical Studies,” Thesis*

submitted for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy (Canterbury Christ Church University, 2019), i, accessed May 1, 2021, <https://core.ac.uk/download/pdf/287634823.pdf>.)

That's a lot to unpack, but these bodies of research boil down to the argument that we inherit a much richer and diverse Judeo-Christian legacy than we might think—one that includes Afro-Asian people and encounters, as well as those who are neither male nor female. And for far too long, because of the ways our stories have been white-washed by those interpreting them to us, we have not been able to imagine a God who loves all people, truly as they are, as they come to the waters to be baptized.

As Philip encounters him, this eunuch is “other.” He has journeyed long—months probably—to worship in Jerusalem, but because of the exclusionary laws, he was denied entry into the Temple and thus denied the teaching therein. He is trying to read scripture on his own, but has no one to interpret it to him until Philip meets him where he is—out in the Wilderness. This is key. Philip meets the eunuch where he is. God shifts Philip's location. The eunuch already tried to journey to the center of intellectual and theological power where he was rejected. Philip meets the eunuch where he is, not only physically, but culturally, and interprets in a way that the eunuch can understand. One must surmise that to do this, Philip must have found a way to help the Gospel make sense from within the eunuch's cultural point of view. To do this, Philip had to understand to some extent where the eunuch was coming from. So this becomes a cross-cultural exchange, and is why the eunuch's question, “What is there to prevent me from being baptized?” is so important. What indeed is there to stop believers from joining the Body of Christ? Not culture, not physicality, not exclusionary laws. Philip baptizes the eunuch there and then.

We might take a lesson from Philip and the eunuch. When engaging those whom we experience as “other,” we must ensure that how we are engaging does not force those who are different from ourselves to adhere to our own cultural norms. This is the difference between “welcoming” and “affirming.” “Welcoming” means come and join us, but stay only if you can become like us. “Affirming” means come as you are, and we will learn from you, and you from us. We will be changed by each other, just like Philip and the eunuch.

I very much hope for this in my mutual ministry with you, as I learn the cultures of the Berkshires and the many histories of those who live north, south, east and west of the so-called “tofu curtain” in the Pioneer Valley.

But what happens if we never encounter the “other?” If we only stay in our bastions of comfort—which is to say, if we never travel down that wilderness road? And how do we engage in authentic encounter that does not devolve into poverty tourism, or assuming that we're the ones with the answers, or old models of being church that perpetuate narratives of us being “the great saviors”?

I think it takes a willingness to find the richness in a city and its people, that's different from the one we live in. I invite you to think on a city in our region: Holyoke. When I was moving here, and thinking about where to live, one of my friends said, “Oh, Holyoke! You'll love Holyoke!” On one of my drives up to explore the region and to find housing, we spent a day driving the Pioneer Valley, including Shelburne Falls, Greenfield, all the Hadleys and –hamptons (East, West, North), Amherst, and down into Springfield and Holyoke. We reached Holyoke at the

golden hour, with beautiful sunlight bouncing off of derelict brick buildings and boarded up homes. It was clear the city had been grand once. It was also clear that, though there might be a lot going for it, we were not going to find it in one hour of driving around. I left saddened that I could not see what my friend had promised, but I trusted that it was there.

Fast forward a few months: last week, my friend Luis, the Program Manager for Communities at the Massachusetts Cultural Council, posted about a walking tour in Holyoke “of large-scale artistic banners, storefront installations, and a public art mural by El Corazón [that] reflects the vital culture of the surrounding neighborhoods and catalyzes creative and economic opportunity through a series of public art projects along Main Street in Holyoke—the heart of Holyoke.”

The Curator’s Statement by Shey Rivera Ríos reads: “El Corazón de Holyoke rises with the people to bring back hope and activity as we begin to embrace new life post-pandemic. Local artists have created artworks that center the importance of cultural identity as our ancestral technology of survival and resilience through joy, connection to place, connection to community, and link to our ancestors. These are the things that keep us going, that bring us life in moments of hardship. ‘¡Arriba, corazones!’, as Ruth Fernandez would say. We are here, and we survive. Our stories carry us forward.”

Can you connect to this? Can you feel the resiliency? Can you feel a spark of what your ancestors and their tenacity would call you to do in this moment? How might you be called to new life out of hardship? What stories and art would you share?

I learned from this art project that there is a vibrancy in Holyoke. I knew it was there, but I could not see it. I needed someone to help bridge the cultural understanding for me—to show me where to look and how to see. Repeatedly, Luis has been one of the angels in my life, inviting me to see and experience things differently. Who are your angels?

That is the gift, you know, of Church itself. Of this Northwest Region, and of our larger Conference and the Body that is Christ. We are in relationship—we are in covenant with each other, and it draws us into community with those with whom we might not otherwise journey. It calls us to see places through each others’ eyes—something much more possible on the wilderness road than from the comfort of our homes. Who knew the riches we might find as we go—namely, each other?

In the waters of baptism we are called to die to our old selves and to live a new life in Christ. It means we carry a blessing within us that cannot go away. It means “God within us,” just as Christ took on flesh and became “Emmanuel,” “God with us.” It means we are called to keep God’s covenants. It means “the former things have come to pass,” and new possibilities are available through our walk in Jesus’ way. When we are hungry for the dawn, for beauty, for moments that will remind us of life that will break through grief and sadness, we need but to reclaim our baptism and see through Christ’s eyes even the person on the other side of the road.

M. Craig Barnes writes in *The Christian Century*: “When I speak at denominational gatherings, pastors often ask me to say something about the future of the church. The subtext of their invitations is, ‘If you have any ideas for survival, let us know.’ ... The only possible explanation for the church’s survival is that Jesus Christ chose to use it to continue his mission of bringing

the kingdom of God to earth. He can certainly work outside of the church for this holy purpose, but we find our life in the calling to pursue the kingdom. Historically, every time we landed in the ditch, as the mainline church has done today, Christ pulls us out and invites us again to lose our lives to find them. This means we have to stop fretting about our denominational structures, memberships, divisions, and futures; instead we need to immerse ourselves in the baptismal waters that proclaim the perfect love of God that casts out fear.” (M. Craig Barnes, “The Post-Anxiety Church,” *The Christian Century*, January 29, 2016, accessed May 1, 2021, <https://www.christiancentury.org/article/2016-01/post-anxiety-church>.)

We are a baptized people, called to baptize others, and to share the beautiful news that each person is loved by the God who is love itself. We are called to the wilderness road, yes, but ultimately we are called down to the river, and to bring all those who are willing whom we encounter along with us, knowing that not only will their lives be changed for the better, but so will ours, if we are just but willing to loose our grip on the ways we have been, and to live into the ways that God is calling us to be. Amen.