

“Wherever You Go”

Salado UMC—29 April 2018: 5th Sunday of Easter

Preaching Text: Acts 8:26-40—Year B

Salado, Texas 76571

“The world is a book, and those who do not travel read only a page”

Augustine (CE 354-430).

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We ground our Easter worship services in the Acts of the Apostles. Acts begins with Jesus teaching the disciples between Jesus’ resurrection and ascension. Prior to the ascension the disciples ask Jesus: “Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?” This question was surely on the minds of the community Jesus formed around him. Since Jesus’ death they all wanted to know if now was the time that God would act on the believer’s behalf. But Jesus discourages such questions by replying: “It is not for you to know the times or periods that the Father has set by his own authority” (Acts 1:7).

Instead Jesus gives them a task and something of a geographical roadmap for the work that God now assigns them. Jesus promises first that, “You will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you” (Acts 1:8). Jesus continues, “You will be my witnesses (*martyrs*) in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.” We note that this is exactly how the gospel advances—first Jerusalem, then on to Judea and Samaria, and finally to the ends of the earth—Spain (see: Romans 15:24, 28).

We titled worship today: “Wherever You Go.” This Acts’ lesson reminds me of the geographical location that we jokingly describe as “the ends of the earth.” To which one reply is “it may not be the end of the earth, but you can see it from there.” Gaza is on a continuum that we read about in Acts 1:8: “. . . you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.” The “. . . road that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza” is somewhere between Samaria and to “the ends of the earth.” Thus, the gospel pushes farther and farther from the center Jerusalem toward the limits of human habitation. Hear our day’s lesson:

26 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.) 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 (Acts 8:26-40—NRSV).

Luke's story tells us that the Holy Spirit takes Philip to encounter a noteworthy governmental court official. In Ethiopia, this official is the Chief Financial Officer (CFO) in the court of the Candace (the queen). She is a "big deal," and by association so is he. We also note that he is what the Hebrews/Jews call a "God-Fearer"—a non-ethnic Jew, but one who worships Yahweh nonetheless. This fellow is reading Isaiah on returning to Ethiopia from Jerusalem. He and Philip connect and the apostle interprets what the CFO reads. Promptly, the Ethiopian asks for and receives baptism as a believer in Jesus as God's Messiah and promised by Isaiah.

Luke's story interests us for at least four reasons—perhaps among many. First, it reveals to Bible pupils that Luke takes Isaiah's prophecy (see: 56:1-7) seriously. Luke weaves around the prophecy a Eunuch's distinct story. This passage reminds us that God extends God's divine covenant to all who obey. This includes those that others have previously refused fellowship in the community of faith, i.e., eunuchs, foreigners, and other outcasts. Thus, God acts to save people like this eunuch. But we also see an example of how God's mission goes forward with the Holy Spirit pushing it. This Spirit tells Philip to go here and go there. Then the spirit snatches Philip away.

A second feature of Luke's story is that while often it seems like the gospel has a "preferential option" for the poor, the eunuch returns to a cushy job which entails riches and power. Yet Luke understands that the gospel is for rich and for poor. Perhaps this Ethiopian eunuch will share his new found baptismal faith in ways that may establish it even to that remote "end of the earth" destination of Ethiopia.

Third of all, we observe that as the Holy Spirit snatches Philip away, the Ethiopian "went on his way rejoicing." He leaves on the heels of his baptism as a person who has experienced joy—indeed possesses joy. Whether or not Luke intended it, this story runs counter to chapter 3 where Peter/John heal a man crippled from birth. Not a person expresses joy at this wondrous miracle. The witnesses mostly question who, how, what, or why this has happened. Thus, the observers offer no joy as far as I read the text. Yet, this baptized one—this Ethiopian eunuch—returns home with joy. This story might remind us that growing into the baptized community both produces and sustains joy. "Let us rejoice and be glad in it" (Psalm 118:24).

Fourth, a penultimate thought about this text. Justo Gonzalez tells us a bit about the significance of the oasis. Ordinarily a Jewish follower/devotee would have a celebrant baptize them in the Jordan River. But no longer! Since the coming of the Spirit at Pentecost, God is implicitly renewing the whole creation.

No one has to ritually “go to the Jordan” any longer. All water is now potentially baptismal water—out of the tap even—anywhere. So, when Philip and the Ethiopian eunuch see the oasis his question is significant: What is to prevent my being baptized. Nothing, brother; go to the Jordan no longer. The New Creation in Jesus touches all water.

And . . . finally, we have here an answer to those who say, “I don’t interpret the Bible; I just take it as it is.” To the contrary, Philip asks, “Do you understand what you read?” The answer is, of course, “How can I unless someone interprets for me?” The Bible thus tells Bible readers that we can and perhaps must interpret the Bible. “He opened their minds to understand the Scriptures” (Luke 24:45). The Timothy epistles speak of “rightly explaining the word of truth” (2 Timothy 2:15: personal notes from Dr. William Mallard of Candler about this text). It is remarkable we have so much in common with an Ethiopian eunuch. Amen.

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