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Friday, April 30, 2021
Year B, Easter 5

Acts 8:26-40
1 John 4:7-21
John 15:1-8

“Roads in the wilderness”

- Do you remember that TV show from the 80’s called Quantum Leap?
 - It aired in the late 80s and early 90s, and then the reruns went on for longer than that
 - The premise of that show was this: the main character, Sam, would be transported to a different time and place each episode
 - He would be inside the body of someone of that time, controlling their actions, but yet not looking or sounding any different to those of that time
 - It was up to him to then figure out when he was, and why he was there
 - Usually he had to right some wrong that was about to happen
 - Of course there were always the funny awkward moments when he would discover he was in a women’s body
 - Or in some other equally uncomfortable situation which required some on his feet thinking
 - Each time Sam would wonder why in the world he had been transported here
 - And each time the audience wondered where he would be taken next.
 - I wonder if Phillip ever felt that way?
 - In Acts today, Phillip is being sent to odd places via odd routes- “wilderness roads”, roads less traveled
 - He is given strange instructions, and then whisked away once he has completed his task
 - I imagine to Phillip, the Holy Spirit seemed crazy- or at least unpredictable and unknowing
 - But he followed.
- For starters, Philip is sent down a southern road headed to Gaza
 - And the text casually mentions that it is a wilderness road

- Oddly, this road is not a wilderness path at all, according to the New Interpreter's Bible Commentary¹
 - It is not desert or jungle, as I would imagine a wilderness road
- Rather, the wilderness here is speaking less of a geographical place and more of a spiritual one
- There is something holy about the wilderness
- Israel spent forty years wandering in it after leaving Egypt
- Jesus was driven by the Spirit out into the wilderness to be tempted
- And the Spirit once again sends someone down the wilderness path- Phillip
- Perhaps the wilderness is one of the few places where there are few enough distractions that we can think more clearly
- Perhaps even shed some of the baggage that holds us back
- The scenery is different, the auto-pilot is not helpful
- We have to be in the moment each moment to evaluate what is the best course of action each step of the way
- Because we have not been there before
- Without much else around, hopefully the wilderness can be a place where we find ourselves and God
- The monastic movement really got its start with monks, or ascetics, moving into the desert
- Namely St. Anthony- a saint in Africa who became well known because of his move into the wilderness to be closer to God
- The wilderness, whether in the desert or on a crowded street, a back country road, or busy I-94
 - Can allow for serious theological reflection and transformation.²
- In Phillip's case the wilderness route has an opportunity that would not have been possible otherwise
 - Phillip does as the Spirit leads, and he finds a chariot carrying an Ethiopian eunuch
 - This particular individual is employed by the queen of Ethiopia, and is high in her court overseeing her treasury
 - Obviously wealthy, for he was riding in a chariot and had servants to drive it
 - But he is still missing something- longing for something.

¹ NIB, Volume 10, Acts 8:26 commentary

² NIB, Volume 10, Acts 8:26 commentary

- He essentially had everything that the world was going to give him... and he was still traveling his wilderness road
- And we are told he was in Jerusalem to worship, and we can assume that he was a convert, or at least an admirer, of Judaism
- The problem, however, with this man converting and worshipping as a Jew was that he was a eunuch
- In Deuteronomy 23, he is forbidden to worship in the assembly of the Lord³ based on his physical condition
- However, he is reading the scroll of Isaiah⁴
- And it promises a time when Eunuchs will be welcome and given a name better than sons and daughters
- No wonder the eunuch was confused, and wondering who the prophet was talking about- himself or someone else
- After Phillip tells him about Christ, he asks Phillip an honest question: which is it? Am I in or out?
- What is to prevent me from being baptized? Am I acceptable the way that I am?
- And then one of the most intriguing verses of scripture occurs- or rather it does not occur
- The New Revised Standard Version of the Bible, the one we read each Sunday, has no verse 37 of Acts chapter 8
- It is a disputed verse because there are multiple ancient versions of this passage of Acts
- The footnote at this verse says:
 - “Other ancient authorities add ... verse 37, *“And Phillip said, ‘If you believe with all your heart, you may.’ And he replied, ‘I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God.’”*
- Some suggest that a well-meaning scribe added it to an early copy, while others insist that it is original and should be included.⁵
- I find it most intriguing because such occurrences like this- there is another one at the end of the gospel of Mark, by the way
- They give us a glimpse into the ancient conversations that were happening while these books were being written and distributed.

³ Thomas G. Long, *Feasting on the Word* Year B Volume 2, 457

⁴ Karen Baker-Fletcher, *Feasting on the Word* Year B Volume 2, 456

⁵ <http://www.notjustanotherbook.com/bibleacts8verse37.htm>

- These type of things remind me that Scripture is a conversation, born out of the early Christian's attempt to figure out what it meant to follow Christ
- What it meant to listen to the Holy Spirit that had been given at Pentecost.
- It seems with the different versions of this story that early Christians also wrestled with the Eunuch's question:
 - What do we have to do to belong, and are we acceptable?
 - The answer to the Eunuch's question, "what is to prevent me from being baptized," is nothing.
 - After he is baptized, the spirit of God descends on the Eunuch
 - And like an episode of Quantum Leap, Philip is carried away again to his next adventure
- The big hero here is of course Phillip
 - Listening for the Spirit and braving the wilderness are not easy tasks, and Phillip makes it look easy
 - What I have found is we too need a wilderness at times to hear a little better
 - I am not suggesting a walk through the Arizona desert, but a wilderness in our minds might help
 - A place where we create fewer distractions and seek the Spirit.
 - When the Spirit moves, it feels like a inner voice right next to the gut feelings
 - But this one is different from the gut- it is not based on past experiences or strategy
 - It comes as an almost unexplained tug or desire
 - It requires testing, contemplation, and prayer
 - The only real way to sift through what the Spirit may be telling us is to contemplate it while abiding in Christ
 - While plugged in.
 - Jesus describes it as limbs on the vine, and that those limbs who stay close to the vine bear the best fruit
 - Abiding in Christ is a living, ongoing process where over time we discern the Spirit and bear the fruit
 - We hear and learn to trust and follow God's leading, even if it takes us down a wilderness path
- We have been on a wilderness path for some time

- Chances are we have each been thrust onto it this year whether we like it or not- each of us asked to walk a path less familiar
- Whether you have lost someone, or had huge life changes, or perhaps just the high anxiety background of pandemics and politics
- I do not think it is good theology to say that God causes pandemics... or other evil, for that matter
 - That's like the Bad Bible Use from last week's sermon
- But I know that the Holy Spirit will take everything, including terrible things like pandemics, births and deaths, and even wilderness roads
- And find ways to use them for God's Kingdom- turning something bad into something that makes something good
- The whole good news is that God did just this thing with the cross- took an instrument of death and oppression, and made it a path to life
- So what has God shown you on your wilderness path? Who has God brought to you to help or to be of help?
- And what lessons do we now move forward holding?
- The Spirit's path can look confusing, weird, be circular and inefficient from an outsiders perspective
 - I imagine that the lectionary readings are hoping to prepare us a bit for what is to come on Pentecost!
 - Like Phillip, following God's Spirit will cause you at times to wonder where you are and where you are going
 - And why a wilderness road is necessary, when we would prefer a more comfortable path
 - But what we can trust is this: the Spirit knows more than we do
 - Has a more complete picture than we do.
 - And knows not only what we need, but what the world needs of us.
 - Abide in Christ, listen closely, and hold on tight
 - Be faithful to that guidance.
 - And don't be scared of a wilderness road
 - For when you walk that road, you never walk it alone.

Amen.