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“Behold, an Invitation”

Part IV of the Sermon Series, “Catching Up With the Spirit.”

Acts 8:26-40

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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.

An angel of the Lord told Philip to rise up and travel a wilderness road. Some translations call it a desert road, others a lonesome road. Wilderness, desert, lonesome—it's all the same—you get the point. We know this road. We walk upon it. It's our path through 2020.

There are days when the landscape around us is barely recognizable. Our familiar signposts are gone. Work and play don't look like they used to. School and church have undergone a radical makeover. Our president becomes ill, and we don't know what will come next. Every day, it seems, we are presented with new questions. Will our democratic process hold up to the challenge of today? Should we get a vaccine as soon as it's available? Will we be able to gather with beloved family members this Christmas? I don't know the answers to these questions. But I recognize that we are walking on a wilderness road—a desert road—a lonesome road, so let's lay our own context beside the road upon which Philip travels. The text invites us to do so.

Luke, the author of Acts, didn't have to add that the road the Spirit calls Philip to travel is a wilderness road. If you are following along with your Bible, notice this information is in parentheses. It's an aside for us listeners and it functions to open up the story to any wilderness, desert, and lonesome path upon which we travel. It's the path of the not yet. It lies between where we have been and where we hope to land: on the other side of this pandemic, on the other side of grief, on the other side of a bitterly divisive election. It's a path of transition. And if we know anything about transitions, we know this is the only route to transformation.

Ah, but even when we want to be transformed, we rarely set out on this path! We'll choose a clearly marked path to an ambiguous one over and over again, even when a new world is what we desire. We'll avoid the wilderness road until it's no longer possible, until something unexpected knocks us into uncharted territory. A betrayal, a death, a pandemic. We know what the desert road looks like. We know what the lonesome road feels like. We cannot control everything that happens in our life. People and events will steer us into new territory, onto roads we didn't choose, into a wilderness we would rather avoid.

Philip is compelled to walk the wilderness road by both a person and an event, neither of which he could control, neither of which were expected. That person is Jesus, and the event is resurrection. We need to pause here for a moment to let this sink in. The acts in Acts, from the believers sharing everything they have in common to Philip's charging down a wilderness road, make no sense unless a transformational belief in resurrection is at their core. Philip and his community are convinced that not only did Jesus rise from the dead, but that his rising was definitive proof of their and the whole world's liberation from the powers of sin and death. They



believe that through his resurrection Jesus has released the whole world from sin's hold. This liberation has altered all creation, and they no longer fear death.

Freedom from the fear of death, however, doesn't give them a pass to sit back and wait for a heavenly after-life. Convinced Jesus is with them in the here and now through the Holy Spirit, they sense the Holy Spirit calling them into wilderness spaces to participate in growing God's new creation. In the book of Acts, God's Spirit keeps sending disciples where they would not normally have gone to become the means of building a new world. As they head out into unknown territory, whether to build a new form of community or to share the good news with those who have not yet heard, they find God's Spirit has already gone on ahead of them. God's Holy Presence is already there. New creation is unfolding.

Rise up and travel on that lonesome wilderness road, the angel of the Lord told Philip. So, he did what a disciple in Acts does. He got up and went. And, behold, he encountered an Ethiopian eunuch. There is much to unpack in these two words, *Ethiopian eunuch*. For the ancient listener, Ethiopia was a mysterious, exotic region of the world—one that Romans would have likely found as fascinating, and as intimidating, as any unknown land is to us today. Ethiopia is a stand-in for “the end of the earth” Jesus told his followers to bear witness to once the Holy Spirit descended upon them. Add to this Ethiopian the fact that castration would have rendered him neither male nor female according to Greco-Roman culture and he becomes symbolic of the ultimate stranger and outsider in the Book of Acts.

But in this new world where Christ's resurrection means God's presence is among us, no one is to be left out. All creation is being called home to God. Every living being and every place are within the scope of God's restorative power. The Holy Spirit invites Philip onto the wilderness road to see this—to become involved in this—and to share the mind-bending good news of what is happening. If Philip avoids the wilderness road, he will miss the opportunity to experience new creation unfold before his eyes.

More than one commentator has remarked upon the absurdity of this scene. “Stay with that chariot,” the Spirit tells Philip. *Glue* yourself to that chariot, the Greek connotes. As Philip runs beside, he hears the eunuch reading Hebrew scripture. “Do you really understand what you are reading?” Philip asks. The question begs an invitation. Philip has information the eunuch does not yet have, and he's bursting to share it.

This passage from Isaiah couldn't provide a better set-up for Philip. It speaks of someone who, like a sheep, has been led to slaughter. This slaughtered one can no longer speak for himself because he has been taken from the earth. He has no descendants, no future generation to tell of what happened to him. Or does he? Philip is about to embody the answer to that question as he shares the good news.



“About whom is the prophet speaking?” the eunuch asks Philip. “Is he talking about himself, or is he talking about someone else?” And I can’t help but wonder, if the eunuch asks this question because something in the text intersects with his own story. Chances are he has known suffering. Chances are he has suffered humiliation. One thing we do know, he, like Jesus, will not leave behind any offspring. Is the question underneath the eunuch’s question, what will be *my* legacy? Who will live on to tell *my* story?

The irony here is that we are still talking about the Ethiopian eunuch today. Christians in Sudan and Ethiopia revere him as an evangelist and love him as a patron saint. All these years later as Christ’s descendants share the good news of Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection, the Ethiopian eunuch is remembered as one who embraced the good news and shared it with others.

The story of the man with no hope for descendants lives on *through us*, whether we are talking about the eunuch, or Jesus. We are the descendants who get to share the good news that, though Jesus died, he rose again. He appeared to his disciples and they were forever changed. But the good news isn’t meant to stay within the pages of this book. The story lives on through us. The Holy Spirit dwells within us and among us. The Holy Spirit is in every wilderness, every desert, and on every lonesome road, inviting us to follow, inviting us to make our own contribution to this world God loves so much. It’s as simple as sharing the good news that Christ goes before us into the world to restore all of creation. It’s as challenging as following God’s Spirit down a wilderness road where nothing looks familiar.

In a few minutes we will join Christians throughout the world to share Holy Communion. Through this sacrament we proclaim the mystery of our faith: Christ has died. Christ is risen. Christ will come again. Imagine what the world can look like when Christ’s descendants embrace these words and share them with others.

Behold! The Spirit is on this wilderness road inviting us to walk, run, and glue ourselves to others to share the good news that God is in our midst, and therefore anything is possible. Do not lose heart, my friends. We are the people of resurrection. Though the road feels lonesome, we are never alone. Though it looks like a desert, water in the wilderness is God’s specialty.

