

I wonder if anyone here has ever been able to say “I feel like I’m in the desert – in a spiritual wilderness. I’m on a long, dry journey and on a road all by myself.”?

I wonder if anyone here has ever been able to say “I’ve gone right up to the gates of the Temple – and the religious authorities tell me that I can’t go in.”?

In the story from Acts, assigned for the Feast Day of St. Philip, we meet someone who is not only in a literal desert –but more importantly, in a spiritual desert. We meet someone whose heart and whose mind are yearning to be opened. Someone who has walked up to the gates of the Temple, and been told to turn back.

From the story, we can know that our pilgrim is a ‘God-Fearer’. A Gentile – not a Jew – But nonetheless someone who is familiar with the stories of Abraham and Moses. Someone who knows both the beauty and the pain of the Psalms. Someone who knows the tragedy of the captivity and exile in Babylon. Someone who reads the Prophets. Someone who struggles with that vocabulary of impending judgment coupled with the language of a dream for a better future.

Our pilgrim is a diplomat from Africa A person of high position – socially and politically. If not wealthy in his own right, he at least enjoyed a lifestyle of some comfort and ease. After all, he’s the treasurer of the Ethiopian Queen. He *rides* in a chauffeur-driven chariot. Not *walking* in the desert like poor ole’ Philip. And he’s highly educated. We find him reading a Jewish religious document that’s been translated into Greek. Something to which all seminarians surely aspire.

We are told that he has gone up to Jerusalem to worship. What a surprise he received when he got there. No matter how far his journey had been.

No matter what sacrifices he made or what dangers he faced along the way. No matter how well educated he was. No matter how highly placed his political or diplomatic position. No matter how much money he had.

When he walked up to the gate of the Temple he was not allowed inside. Instead of an open door he found a religious system that had constructed walls and barriers so strict and so high as to seem insurmountable.

Instead of a place of worship with an *open* heart he would find instead a temple where the Chief Priest, the elders and the scribes had *hearts of stone*. Instead of a community in which he could be instructed and nurtured in his faith, He found a system of theology and practice that said:

‘We believe in the Bible around here! Go home and read your Bible! Don’t you dare show your face here and expect us to accept your lifestyle! You need to change your life before you can be welcome here!’”

Because you see – he was a eunuch. The law prohibited a eunuch from even *entering into the assembly* of the people of Israel. And so, we find our pilgrim going back to Ethiopia. In the desert – on a wilderness road.

In the stories of the Bible The desert is almost always One of those ‘thin places’ where humankind meets the Divine. Moses @ Sinai. Jacob and his wrestling partner. The Hebrew people during the Exodus. Elijah in the cave where he heard the sheer sound of silence.

And now we come upon a spiritual pilgrim who began a journey to find and worship God. A seeker of truth who has been told instead, to go home. Told that he was not welcome in the house of God because he was sexually deficient.

On the way home he is reading from the prophet Isaiah:

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.

And on that wilderness road, as he is reading those words he meets the deacon Philip. Sent by the Holy Spirit. Philip hears the scripture being read aloud and asks – *Do you understand what you are reading?*

The eunuch replies with his own question.

How can I possibly understand this stuff – unless someone tells me what it means?

Philip gets into the chariot with the eunuch and beginning with the scripture from Isaiah he proclaimed the good news about Jesus. What a difference from the reception the eunuch received at Jerusalem.

Instead of the locked gates – the door is open. Looking for truth – he finds it. Asking for knowledge – he receives it.

As Philip unfolds the story of salvation they begin to leave the wilderness of despair and rejection. As they go along the way, they come upon water. Here we reach the climax of the story.

The eunuch has been to Jerusalem to worship and been denied. Being referred to an ancient set of rules and regulations he was told that he was ineligible. How hungry he must have been for a relationship with God! Even after the rejection at the Temple he is still studying the scripture.

He’s already received one Bible lesson. One that told him he was unworthy. Yet when he encounters someone else – a hitchhiker in the desert – he asks, seeks, and knocks one more time.

He might be rejected again. He is at risk to be told once again how the scripture will find him lacking. But he asks anyway.

How can I understand this reading – unless someone guides me?

And listening to Philip, the eunuch hears the story. The story that is unfolded in scripture, and in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus.

Everything that we know about God and the relationship between God and creation tells us only one story. God is Love.

Then – the eunuch asks the final question upon which the entire enterprise hangs. It is time for Philip to either put up – or shut up.

Seeing that they had come upon water the eunuch asks the fateful question:

What is to prevent me from being baptized?

How many times has that question been asked in the centuries since?

What is to prevent me from being baptized? the eunuch asked.

What is to prevent me from being free? People held in slavery asked – and are still asking today.

What is to prevent me from being equal to a man? Women asked – and are still asking today.

What is to prevent me from being ordained a priest? Or called to be a rector? Or consecrated a bishop? Women have asked and are still asking today. Gays & lesbians have asked and are still asking today.

What is to prevent me from being accepted as a priest in the church? 20-something seminarians have asked that question for a generation –and are still asking today.

What is to prevent me from being accepted as a priest in the church? 40 50-something seminarians are now asking that question today.

What is to prevent me from realizing *all the ministry* to which my baptism calls me? Students who studying for ministry *but not seeking ordination* have asked that question – and are still asking today.

What is to prevent me from being baptized? The eunuch asked.

Philip had a lot of choices.

He could have said “Well, gee whiz. “I” would really like to baptize you. Some of my best friends are eunuchs! But you have to understand how much it would upset the more traditional minded people.”

He could have said “Oh no. You’ve got to understand we’re just getting this whole thing started. This is only my second stop outside Jerusalem. If we start off by baptizing people like you the whole thing will likely fall apart. We have to consider *unity* above everything else.

He could have pled ignorance and gone back to consult with the authorities.

He could have asked for a committee to be formed in order to consider the theological ramifications of the question.

Thanks Be To God – the entire episode took place with only the Eunuch – Philip – and the Holy Ghost on hand.

So they stopped the chariot.
They went down into the water.
And Philip baptized the Eunuch.

And the Holy Spirit brought honor and affirmation to the Eunuch’s inquiring and discerning heart, instead of rejecting the questions he asked.

The Spirit confirmed the Eunuch’s courage to will and to persevere, rather than closing the door to his desire to know God.

Knowing the Eunuch for who he truly was God reached out in love and gave him, at last, the joy for which the Eunuch had sought.

We have got to remember this story at this time in our lives, and in the life of the church. We have to be more like the eunuch and ask that question. We have to be more like Philip – and listen more closely to the Holy Spirit.

It is up to us to stand with the diplomat from Africa and knock on that door. It is up to us to journey with the pilgrim from Ethiopia – through the wilderness if necessary – and seek for the kingdom of God. And finally, it is up to us to ask – with the eunuch – *What is to prevent me?*