

“Interpreting in the Light”
A sermon by the Reverend Joe Genau
for Edgewood Presbyterian Church
Acts 8:26-40
June 3, 2018
More Light Sunday

For More Light Sunday, I ordered a perfect, heavenly beam of sunshine to stream through our stained glass this morning. Those of you who were at the Barons game on Friday night already know the title of “reverend” doesn’t actually get one any weather privileges. And so, it would seem, it will be up to the people of God, , with divine help and inspiration, to provide more light.

That’s how God works, we know. God is constantly pouring light and love into the world in a billion ways and looking for collaborators in us to help the love and light be known. God offers wisdom and peace and beauty and implores and expects and commands us to conspire with God to do something holy with these gifts. How often we humans have missed that God was giving us anything, or failed to recognize the sacredness in what we’ve been given, or been unable to imagine a new thing, prisoners to what we know. How often we have taken what God pours into the world and consigned magnificence to trash heaps and dungeons. Nevertheless, God persists in generously offering newness and seeking human hands and hearts to work through, because once in a while we respond in glory.

There are houses of faith here in the Birmingham area, and others in the state, and many others around the country and the world, that not only offer a true welcome to all of God’s people, but are willing to celebrate that welcome during Pride Week or near National Coming Out Day or at some other time. These communities, like ours, know well the pain and violence — bodily and spiritual — that society at large and religious people in particular have inflicted upon LGBTQ+ children of God. We know that the burden is on us not to simply be *more friendly*, but to confess where we have fallen short and to grapple with internalized biases and fears and to actively work to transform ourselves and the world around us into a vision of the reign of God.

Of course, there are many, many more houses of faith near and far that cannot or will not see a path to such a welcome. And there are some that are moving, even at glacial speed. And, thanks be to God, there are blessed souls called to stand within those communities and push from within. It would be easy for us to slip into a holier-than-y’all sense of superiority in regard to less-welcoming places. And I believe we are called to resist and name as sin any attempted proclamation of the Gospel that excludes, impedes, harms, or violates one of God’s own, particularly in connection to their bodies and identities and expressions of sacred love.

But we must remember that our own welcome is imperfect and our understanding incomplete. (Presbyterians have always stressed education, and the people of God always have more to learn.) Just as importantly, we must remember that the light that has been shed for us is a gift from almighty God, and we are implored, and expected, and commanded to share that light — to respond in glory that new hearts might see what God is up to. And here we find Philip and the Ethiopian eunuch.

Let's find out more about this eunuch. He is never named, and how interesting that in our scripture his identity is completely tied to his body. The eunuch has some status. In his world in Ethiopia, he's a court official of the Candace — the queen mother and ruler of Ethiopia. Whether from books, *Game of Thrones*, or biblical study, you might know that in the ancient world eunuchs were able to have special status because they were deemed "safe" around the women. They were trusted to perform all sorts of functions for queens and kings with no threat of causing lustful trouble or wreaking havoc with royal bloodlines. At the same time, eunuchs were stereotyped as immoral when it came to matters of the flesh — scorn heaped upon them by culture and religion for what had been done to their bodies. In the purity codes of Leviticus and Deuteronomy eunuchs were given lower status, viewed as scarred, defective men, unable to be fruitful and multiply.

The Ethiopian eunuch was an insider in his world, although with complications. At the temple, he was an outsider, unable to enter, not because of his ethnicity, but because of his sexuality. God sends one of Jesus's disciples after him. Philip is told to go to the wilderness road, and he goes. The Spirit tells Philip to approach the chariot, and he runs to it. Here is Philip, as foreign to a court official from Ethiopia as possible and as unlikely to have a religious dialogue with a eunuch as can be, and he runs to that chariot and hears from the eunuch's lips the Word of God from the prophet Isaiah.

What he hears is one of Isaiah's Servant Songs. If you were here on Wednesday nights during Lent this year, we read these Servant Songs as we sat in silence surrounded by candles. Philip asks the eunuch if he understands what he is reading. The answer is...yes and no. The man who has an important job but an isolated life, who is an outsider within his faith because of having been shorn as a child, reads:

"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."

The eunuch has a question: "About whom, may I ask you, does the prophet say this, about himself or about... someone else?" Is this just about Isaiah? Or...am I in here too? Is this God's word for me today? Is God still speaking?

The book of the prophet Isaiah is a book of hope and promise for the marginalized. It's what Jesus reads from at the synagogue in Nazareth — with good news to the poor and freedom for the prisoners and sight for the blind and freedom for the oppressed. Just a few chapters after the verses the eunuch is reading, the prophet says, "thus says the Lord: To the eunuchs who keep my sabbaths, who choose the things that please me and hold fast my covenant, I will give, in my house and within my walls, a monument and a name better than sons and daughters; I will give them an everlasting name that shall not be cut off."

Philip could have shown the eunuch the earlier laws — the verse in Deuteronomy 23 where it very graphically states that a eunuch cannot worship. He could have cited scripture back and forth and debated himself about the role of eunuchs within the faith. He could have formed a committee to study the issue. He could have run from the hard questions, run away from where the Spirit had led him.

Instead, we find that Philip started with the passage from Isaiah and proclaimed to the eunuch the good news about Jesus. Not only does God know and understand your experience, but Jesus himself came as the Suffering Servant and bore humiliation and violence. This scripture is about Isaiah's prophecy, it's about you, it's about

God, and there is news to share about the one who came and lived and went to the margins and died for it.

Having heard the Gospel, and now spotting some water, the eunuch asks Philip, “What is to prevent me from being baptized?” Well, he hasn’t met with the Session, for one! And we could come up with all sorts of reasons...all sorts of fears and roadblocks and discomfort about things being done decently and in order. There is nobody else there to baptize him. Philip has the power to deny the outsider a blessing, to deny him entry, to deny him the outward and visible sign of an inward and invisible grace. Philip holds the cards, but he knows they are not his to hold. What he’s been given here isn’t control, but a gift. A beautiful grace that can work through his hands. And dripping with the waters of baptism, the eunuch went on his way rejoicing.

Before the sharing of the good news and the explanation of the scripture and the baptism and the joy, Philip had to ask a leading question, wondering if the eunuch understood. And the eunuch answered with a leading questions of his own: “How can I, unless someone guides me?” In this exchange Philip has invited the eunuch and the eunuch has invited Philip. These two have encountered one another, not pretending their differences don’t exist, but shining the light of the Gospel upon them.

Led by God to this very spot, this very encounter, Philip doesn’t mess up the gift God has given him. Biblical scholar Karen Baker-Fletcher puts it best: “Philip does not tell the eunuch that if he only confesses Jesus Christ, receives water baptism, and prays hard, then God will give him gonads and a desire for women. Philip simply teaches that the prophecies in Isaiah have been revealed and fulfilled in Jesus.”¹ Philip’s job here was to give life to the confounding words of scripture lying flat on a scroll. The eunuch needs someone to teach him, someone to interpret the Word of God. He needs someone who has felt the love of God, someone who can shed the light of God’s spirit into the words of the prophet.²

The book of the Acts of the Apostles is the story of the embrace of the Gospel of Christ growing and growing beyond Jesus’s band of followers. It is the story of Christ’s radical inclusion being understood by his disciples and apostles as more radical and more inclusive than they realized. It is the story of the circle of grace growing wider and wider like the ripples from a pebble dropped in a lake - or from a beloved body being dunked in the water on the side of the road.

We don’t encounter many eunuchs today. But we all encounter beloved children of God who find a very mixed message in scripture, if it is read flat, on a scroll, without holy light to give it life. We all know — whether we are aware or not — believers whose bodies are cause for discussion among religious folk. Heck, I’m a straight, white, cisgender male and I may be a decent ally, but I’m still up here yapping away as if I can understand what you have been through and are going through. I cannot.

Here’s what I do know: We are all interpreter’s of God’s story. We get to search for the life in these texts. We get to tell of our encounters with the people of God — whether we’ve been told we’re special every day of our lives or whether we’ve been told lies about our love and our identities and our bodies by people who have squandered the gift of light from God. So what story will we write, and what story will we tell?

In our nation-under-God, a distorted story of divine love is entrenched. It tells of a god whose love is limited and who draws a small circle of inclusion and the story is always told by someone who finds themselves at the

¹ Karen Baker-Fletcher, Commentary on Acts 8:26-40 in *Feasting on the Word: Year B, Volume 2*

² Thomas G. Long, Commentary on Acts 8:26-40 in *Feasting on the Word: Year B, Volume 2*

precise center of that circle, flanked by people who look just like them. These are shadow stories, with the light of Christ actively and intentionally blocked from illuminating the truth. Somehow, policy is made and laws are enacted based on these shadow stories.

Will we let that stand? Will we let stories of judgment and exclusion and fear be connected to our Jesus? If so, we have to wonder where and to whom God's Spirit will lead us next.

We can choose, instead, to be apostles, sharing the Gospel in our own acts, ready to encounter whoever might be coming down the road. We can ask any who will listen if they know about what God is doing in the world. We can offer any who wonder if God knows their story and cares about them an emphatic, "Yes!" We can make our message clear and unequivocal and bold:

You are God's. God loves you. You are wonderfully made. Come, feel the water. Come, step into the light.