

## Introduction

Check-in & Introductions

*“Look, here is water!”*

## New Testament Lesson

Acts 8:26-39 (NRSV)

<sup>26</sup> 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.) <sup>27</sup> 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 <sup>28</sup> and was returning home; seated in his chariot, he was reading the prophet Isaiah. <sup>29</sup> Then the Spirit said to Philip, “Go over to this chariot and join it.” <sup>30</sup> So Philip ran up to it and heard him reading the prophet Isaiah. He asked, “Do you understand what you are reading?” <sup>31</sup> He replied, “How can I, unless someone guides me?” And he invited Philip to get in and sit beside him. <sup>32</sup> 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.

<sup>33</sup> In his humiliation justice was denied him.

Who can describe his generation?

For his life is taken away from the earth.”

<sup>34</sup> The eunuch asked Philip, “About whom, may I ask you, does the prophet say this, about himself or about someone else?” <sup>35</sup> Then Philip began to speak, and starting with this scripture, he proclaimed to him the good news about Jesus. <sup>36</sup> 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?” <sup>38</sup> He commanded the chariot to stop, and both of them, Philip and the eunuch, went down into the water, and Philip<sup>a</sup> baptized him. <sup>39</sup> 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.

## Bible/Sermon Focus

The story of the baptism of the Ethiopian eunuch is one of the richest stories in Bible. Many scholars in recent history have offered new insights into how we can read this text. Some of this scholarship has made it to the local church parish setting. Most of it hasn't. Today we will barely scratch the surface of this remarkable story.

First, the story of the Ethiopian eunuch can be read through the lens of liberation theology. Liberation theology claims that God works to liberate and free more and more people as time goes on, reconciling them and redeeming them into community. Liberation theology recognizes a process, clear and apparent in the biblical witness, in which God begins with a small handful of people and slowly expands who is “in.” Tracing the status of the eunuch as well as that of the foreigner (as this eunuch happens to be) are clear examples of this process in the Bible.

In the Torah (Deuteronomy 23), eunuchs and particular foreigners are forbidden in the assembly. This means they are not considered Jewish and cannot participate in ritual or worship, cannot buy property, and do not have access to the court system or have protection under the law. By the time we reach the prophet Isaiah (56:3-7) both the foreigner and the eunuch have been prophesied a place among the assembly. And of eunuchs God promises, "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." And in Matthew (19) they are mentioned in passing as part of the community from none other than lips of Jesus himself. And then here, in our text for today, we meet Philip and the Ethiopian eunuch on the road. Upon hearing the good news of Jesus this person says, "Look, here is water! What is to prevent me from being baptized?"

The grace of God is audacious indeed! It's so deep and transformative that even this person knows that they are welcome in the body of Christ. The gospel is GOOD NEWS!

Many different types of liberation theology have written on this text (including black liberation theology). But the newest, and perhaps most audacious work has been in queer theology in work surrounding intersex bodies. To some this may sound like a huge leap. But, given that Jewish rabbis historically name multiple different genders, it is no surprise. Rabbis perform circumcision and some children are not born with such distinct genders as we presume. After all 1 in 300 children are still sent for "sex testing" at birth. The word that Jesus uses for *eunuch* in Matthew 19:12 when he says, "*For there are eunuchs who have been so from birth*" is one of these words for an in-between gender. These words have been around for centuries.

Again, we are barely scratching the surface. Some of the most liberating work done in intersex theology and queer theology is simply the calling out of false dichotomies. Things aren't always one way or the other all of the time. The love of God for example seems to function in a much more liminal way.

Dr. Xochitl Alvizo (first name pronounced So-Shee) once said, "the body of Christ is a queer body." This doesn't mean the body of Christ is a gay body. Or a straight body. Here the term queer is meant to reject both of those concepts and is meant as a non-defined, liminal space. If the liberating love of God removes the category of "other" that some of us fit in... then with that removal, so goes the category of "normative" that some of us fit in; leaving only...us. Just us in a space of freedom from these categories that the world wants to use to define us, when in truth, only God defines us. And God claims us. God made us and God called us good.

Again, the liberating, audacious grace of God is indeed good news.

And it is this body in particular, the body of the Ethiopian eunuch, that is the first gentile body to be baptized. There is beautiful significance in this story if we are brave enough to witness it.

We humans often like to fit things into nice, neat categories, especially when it benefits us. The party we vote for, the nation we live in, the hobbies we enjoy...it's not that these things don't matter, it's that they don't matter when it comes to the love of God and to admittance into the body of Christ.

The audacious, liberating power of God calls all the sheep back into the fold. After all, it is only the audacious grace of God that can move each of us to say, "Look, here is water! What is to prevent me from being baptized?" Yes, you...even you.

To learn more about the story of the Ethiopian eunuch and intersex please watch a clip from **The Reformation Project**. Start clip at 20:00 – 39:05; about 20 minutes. Please feel free to watch the rest of the video on your own time.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=331smwhg0gM&t=2677s>

## Discussion Questions

1. If your group watched the clip take some time to discuss what was new to you. What did you like? What made you uncomfortable?
2. In the video Dr. Megan DeFranza says "Somehow these stories never make it to church." Why is that?
3. When the eunuch and Phillip are talking, he is reading chapter 53 of Isaiah. If after his baptism he continues to read the Bible he will stumble upon a text that mentions both foreigners and eunuchs in just three chapters! Read Isaiah 56:3-7 (NRSV) and discuss what you think his reaction would be.
4. Do you think it's important for us as Christians to read different interpretations of scripture? If so, how do you handle it when you disagree with particular interpretations?

## Prayer

Holy God, thank you for the bodies you have given us. Remind us that your creation is good. That all bodies are good bodies. That we are loved and that you love all. Teach us to share the good news to all of your children. Teach us to listen to the good news when it is shared with us. Your grace is audacious. Your love is unending. Amen.

*"Somehow these stories never make it to church."  
– Dr. Megan DeFranza*