

## MESSAGE FOR SUNDAY 2<sup>ND</sup> MAY 2021.

**Isaiah 53.**

**Acts 8:26-40.**

Philip the evangelist, also a deacon, preached and proclaimed the gospel to a eunuch from Ethiopia. This Ethiopian eunuch was a man of great authority. He was treasurer to the Queen of Ethiopia. He was a descendant of Ham one of the three sons of Noah (Genesis 10). This is the first of three notable conversions recorded in the Book of Acts. In Acts chapter 9 we read about the conversion of Saul of Tarsus who was “a member of the Jewish Sanhedrin” and a descendant of Shem. Then, in Acts chapter 10 we read about the conversion of Cornelius, “an officer in the Roman army,” who was a descendant of Japheth.

Philip was told by an angel to make an evangelism call on the road that goes south from Jerusalem to Gaza. A desert road with little of great note on the way. Philip is given no name or address of where he is to go. Yet Philip comes across an Ethiopian who was reading the Scriptures. Philip explained the Scriptures to him and leads him to faith in Jesus Christ.

The Ethiopian’s anonymity is curious given that Philip’s name occurs nine times in the Greek text. The story is about Philip as an unlikely instrument to reach the Ethiopian. If the Ethiopian had been named perhaps we would miss the significance of his ethnicity and his social ranking. No Ethiopians are named among the Pentecost crowd in Acts. As an Ethiopian he represents those who are geographically and ethnically, far away.

Philip must have looked rather haggard having only recently fled Jerusalem with possibly just the shirt on his back, like a vagabond. The Ethiopian was a learned man able to ascertain the literal meaning of the scriptures. Yet, he did not allow his attainments to blind him to his limitations. We should practice a faith that continually seeks understanding rather than an understanding that is seeking faithful followers. God is the ultimate object of our faith, and God remains inscrutable less God become made in our image. God raised Jesus. The humility by which the lamb endured his death is embodied in the Ethiopian. The Ethiopian demonstrated humility in relation to Philip and the scriptures. Despite his high social status, he invited Philip to join him.

The Ethiopian was reading the scripture passage Isaiah 53:7 from the Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible or the Septuagint. The text is about a metaphorical lamb led to slaughter, silently enduring his death and whose life is finally taken up from the earth. The eunuch asked whether the text was autobiographical or about someone else. This question may seem strange to a Christian today having known for most of his or her life that this text speaks about Christ.

Philip told the Ethiopian the good news about Jesus. Strikingly, the Ethiopian is referred to as the eunuch, beginning with his request that Philip explain to him the scriptures. The eunuch responds to the good news by expressing a desire to participate in the ritual of baptism. Both Philip and the eunuch enter and emerge from the waters together.

Why did the Ethiopian so readily accept Philip’s interpretation? Perhaps, even though the text does not say so, the Spirit spoke to the Ethiopian too.

The story of Christ is given to the Ethiopian by Philip and after his baptism we are told that he went on his way rejoicing. The good news about Jesus should evoke rejoicing especially among those living on the margins needing to know what the text means for them. The Ethiopian’s story vividly

demonstrates how God in the Jesus-event will and can draw different people to himself and not always those we might imagine experiencing the power of the resurrection.

I have had the privilege of witnessing the lasting effects of this encounter between Philip and the Ethiopian eunuch. The pilgrimage I made to Ethiopia a few years ago reveals a country where ninety percent of Ethiopians are followers of Christ. The Ethiopian orthodox Church has 36 million members to date. What a legacy for this Ethiopian eunuch.

There are many elements of God's providence and intervention in the story of the Ethiopian eunuch. The account reveals the importance of these three things: The Word of God, the Holy Spirit's leading, and a human evangelist. For a person to accept the truth, he must first hear the truth preached. It is God's desire that the truth be preached everywhere. The Spirit of the Lord had been preparing the eunuch's heart to receive the gospel. As the eunuch read Isaiah, he began to ask questions, and at just the right moment the Lord brought Philip across his path. The field was "ripe for harvest", and Philip was God's labourer in the field. This was no coincidence. It was God's plan from the very beginning, and Philip was obedient to that plan.