Text: Acts 8:26-39

Date: 25th April 2021

Place: MUC, Westfield

**Introduction**

There are probably four characters in Acts Chapter 8 verses 26 to 39 – Philip, an Angel of the Lord, a eunuch from Ethiopia, not mentioned but there must be at least someone driving the chariot. The name of the Ethiopian eunuch isn't given, but he was Secretary of the Treasury under Queen Candace of Ethiopia, and he had been to Jerusalem on a religious pilgrimage.

As a eunuch, he was a person who was seen as ritually unclean and therefore prohibited from entering the Temple.

This eunuch must have been a man of great faith, to have gone all this way just to visit a temple he could not enter. No one would have talked to him there because he was supposedly unclean.

He was on his way home when the high point of the trip occurred.

He was cruising along in his chariot reading out aloud to himself from the book of Isaiah when the apostle Philip, inspired by the Spirit instructs -*“Get up and go toward the south* *to the road that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza.”*

By the way this is not Philip the Apostle. This is Philip the Evangelist,

who was chosen along with Stephen and the rest of the “seven” to care for the poor in Jerusalem. And Gaza is located in that part of the Palestinian Territories known today as the Gaza Strip.

The eunuch was reading from the Book of Isaiah and Philip asked him whether

he understood what he was reading. The eunuch said he could use some help on one passage in particular, and this was the passage:

***32*** *“He was led like a sheep to the slaughter, and as a lamb before its shearer is silent, so he did not open his mouth.****33****In his humiliation he was deprived of justice.Who can speak of his descendants? For his life was taken from the earth.”*

Who in the world was Isaiah talking about? The eunuch wanted to know, and Philip said it was Jesus. Jesus was the one who was gentle as a sheep and innocent as a lamb. He was the one who had been unjustly humiliated and slaughtered.

Luke tells us that *“****37****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.”*And even more quickly than he appeared on the scene, Philip disappeared. And Luke tells us, “the eunuch saw him no more, and went on his way rejoicing.”

And supposedly this unnamed Ethiopian eunuch, became the first Christian in Africa, and is the patron saint of Ethiopia.

**Let us pray…**

“Through the written word, and the spoken word,
may we know your Living Word Jesus Christ our Savour. Amen.”

For those from the evangelical persuasion Acts chapter 8 verses 26-39

is a great conversion story. Philip leads the Ethiopian Eunuch to faith.

John Piper is the founder and teacher of [desiringgod.org](https://www.google.com/search?client=safari&rls=en&q=desiringGod.org&ie=UTF-8&oe=UTF-8) and chancellor of Bethlehem College & Seminary. For 33 years, he served as pastor of Bethlehem Baptist Church, in Minnesota. He is author of more than 50 books,

And commented on this story…

*“Now Philip knows what the Lord has been doing in directing him to this desolate place where there is one lone chariot and man from Ethiopia.*

*The Lord is having mercy on a man whose nationality and sexual impotence might have made him think the God of Israel would never care about him.*

*And not only that, the Lord is orchestrating the evangelization of Ethiopia. We can't know for sure, but Irenaeus wrote in the second century that this Ethiopian became a missionary among his people (Against Heresies iii.12.8; cf.*[*Psalm 68:31*](https://biblia.com/bible/esv/Ps%2068.31)*;*[*87:4*](https://biblia.com/bible/esv/Psalm%2087.4)*).*

*Philip proclaimed the good news of Jesus to him (v. 35)—that "the Lord has laid on him the iniquities of us all" (*[*Isaiah 53:6*](https://biblia.com/bible/esv/Isa%2053.6)*) and that we are set right with God through his death and resurrection (*[*Isaiah 53:4–5*](https://biblia.com/bible/esv/Isa%2053.4%E2%80%935)*,*[*11–12*](https://biblia.com/bible/esv/Isaiah%2053.11%E2%80%9312)*).*

*The Ethiopian believed, was baptized (v. 38) along the road, and went on his way rejoicing (v. 39), while Philip was taken up to Azotus by the Spirit.”*

According to John Piper “the story of Philip and the Ethiopian eunuch teaches us one of the ways God uses to evangelize the world.”

Personally, I think the story is about more than evangelising the world.

And those from the progressive persuasion or camp, mostly see this story as

God breaking down boundaries.

Dawn Hutchings, a Lutheran in America who called herself a 21st century progressive Pastor has these comments on the story: *“Centuries of Christianity resulted from Philip’s unlikely mission to an Ethiopian eunuch, through the Spirit’s call to cross the traditional boundaries that existed. Those traditional boundaries could be supported by quoting scripture and yet the Spirit prompted Philip to cross those boundaries anyway. In the church, we have helped to build and also to tear down some of the strongest boundaries of all.*

*Some boundaries we have begun to break down, through the Spirit’s help, and others we have only strengthened by our action or our inaction.*

*In the name of Christ, Christians have justified slavery and Christians have fought against slavery.*

*In the name of Christ, Christians have oppressed women and Christians have fought against the oppression of women.*

*In the name of Christ, Christians have condemned gay and lesbian people and Christians have affirmed gay and lesbian people.*

*The Gospel is not a respecter of boundaries. It doesn’t matter what the religious establishment says, no one is cut off from Gods’ love.”*

Personally, I lean more towards this interpretation of Acts 8:26-39.

This week in the light of what has happened to us, when I read Acts 8:26–39,

the designated lectionary text for this morning I was struggling.We are told that Philip proclaimed, “the good news about Jesus”to the Ethiopian eunuch.

What is the good news for us?

Last Sunday we were presented with the bad news about Claire from the Presbytery of Yarra Yarra, Standing Committee.

We are told that *“after a lot of prayer and discernment, Claire has sought an early termination of her placement with MUC.”*

And the Presbytery has accepted her request and advised our Council of its decision.

On the surface the obvious link between Claire’s departure and the story in Acts 8:26-39 is the suddenness of it all. Philip appeared next to Ethiopian eunuch, helped him to make sense of the passage in Isaiah and shared the good news of Jesus and then he suddenly disappeared.

We are told that *“the Spirit of the Lord snatched Philip away,*

*and the eunuch saw him no more”*

The Ethiopian eunuch had no opportunity to bid Philip farewell.

That’s how some of us are feeling! None of us were expecting this.

None of us were prepared for this. None of us were primed for this.

For some of us the suddenness is heart breaking.

For some of us the suddenness of it all is too painful.

For some of us the suddenness of Claire ending her ministry with MUC

is too overwhelming.

Claire came amongst us less than three years ago and now she is gone.

I was told that many of you were in tears when you heard the news

last Sunday. And for some the tears have turned into anger.

Disappointment. Guilt - “Have I contributed to her sudden departure?”

Sadness. And grief.

We are all grieving. And we will all grieve differently.

You and I know that the way a person experiences grief depends on multiple of factors including their coping mechanisms, cultural norms and support systems. In addition, the relationships also play a vital role in affecting how we respond to loss.

And so unsurprising our individual relationship with Claire would affect the way we grieve, the way we respond to the suddenness of her departure.

I probably have known Claire longer than most of you. I too am grieving. I am also angry. I am disappointed that I am robbed of the opportunity to serve God and God’s people together with Claire. I know she was looking forward to working with me as well.

And some of you are asking why.

Why has this happened? Why the sudden departure? What caused this?

Or who caused this?

Some of you want answers. Some of you require an explanation.

A few might want to lash out and blame the presbytery or the synod

and even our church council.

We want answers!

Some might want to reach out to Claire and ask her why.

Maybe a few of you even wonder whether we can change her mind.

You and I know that Claire would only have made that difficult decision with

deep prayer and reflection.

So, we all need to respect her decision however difficult it is for us.

All our feelings and your reactions are understandable.

We are all grieving.

In Acts 8:26-39 we have a story of a man, named Philip, a follower of Jesus,

one of the seven deacons who were commissioned to look after the Hellenist widows. He is not one of the Apostles. We don’t hear of him after this incident.

If there was such a thing as the Who’s who list, then he wouldn’t have been included. You know what I mean? However, he did make a difference to the Ethiopian eunuch that day!

Philip shared the good news of Jesus and the immediate response was a request for baptism. The Ethiopian eunuch’s encounter with Philip changed his life. The Bible reports that after his baptism, the eunuch “went on his way rejoicing.”

The eunuch’s name is not given in the Bible, but Irenaeus wrote about him

in the second century as Simeon Bachos the Eunuch and said that he was sent to Ethiopia to preach.  In Eastern Orthodox tradition he is considered to be the same “Simeon the Black” or “Simeon who was called Niger” in Acts 13:1.

Philip sat with the Ethiopian Eunuch, had a conversation with him and shared the good news of Jesus and both their lives were changed.

*Long ago I read ‘The Power of One’ written by the late Australian/South African author Bryce Courtenay. It was published on 29th September 1996. Some of you might have read it. The novel traces the adventures of Peekay, an English-speaking South African boy, from age five to age seventeen, from the year 1939 to 1951.*

*In 1939, as Hitler casts his enormous, cruel shadow across the world, the seeds of apartheid take root in South Africa. Peekay’s childhood is marked by humiliation and abandonment, yet he vows to survive and conceives heroic dreams– which are nothing compared to what life actually has in store for him.*

*He embarks on an epic journey through a land of tribal superstition and modern prejudice and racismwhere he will learn the power of words, the power to transform lives, and the power of one.*

I believe in the power of one.

Claire in a short time has made so much difference to so many of you at Manningham Uniting Church. I know she is much loved by many. Isn’t it amazing how one individual can make such a powerful and lasting impression?

Think about it.

The power of ONE.

Claire visited you.

She sat next to you to listen to you.

She was there when you weren’t well.

 Accompanied you when you lost your loved ones.

We are all grieving.

We want answers.

We want to lash out.

We want to do something to show our love and support for Claire.

I understand. I hear you. I feel your pain.

However, you have the power to make a difference. By your words and actions

you can either assist in the process of healing our wounds or create more wounds.

By your words and actions you can either help in diffusing the situation or compound the situation we find ourselves in.

By your words and actions you can either be part of the solution or add to the challenges we are facing.

You have power. You can make a difference. You have choices.

I love these words by Helen Keller, *"I am only one, but still I am one.*

*I cannot do everything, but still I can do something; and because I cannot do everything, I will not refuse to do something that I can do."*

Let each of us do something that will bring us together rather than tear us apart. I DON’T THINK CLAIRE WANTS THAT!

Let each of us do something that will move us forward together instead of holding us back. I DON’T THINK CLAIRE WANTS THAT!

Let each of us do something that would bring hope, comfort and shalom.

Claire wrote a letter to you and she also wrote one to the Church Council.
She ended the letter with her favourite Irish blessing:

As you listen to the blessing, imagine Claire blessing each of us:
*May the road rise up to meet you.
May the wind be always at your back.
May the sun shine warm upon your face;
the rains fall soft upon your fields and until we meet again, may God hold you in the palm of God’s hand.*

***Amen.***

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Please stand now for a blessing for all the Philips and all the Eunuchs, for you and me and all of us who walk the Jesus Way:

*May the Spirit of God draw you out onto the wilderness road.​
May She send you chasing after chariots, beyond all reason or propriety.*

*May She bring you to dark-skinned eunuchs and mouthy Samaritan women
and young ones who dream wild dreams, and may they receive you into their chariots, their homes, their worlds, so you might teach and convert one another. And may you enter the waters of baptism together,
and die and rise in Christ together, in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.*