

Easter 5B: Acts 8:26-40
Church of the Good Shepherd
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A Dry Tree in the Desert

Some years ago, before he was disgraced, Bill Cosby hosted a television show called “Kids Say the Darndest Things.” Each week Cosby would ask questions to cute four- to eight-year-olds and then chuckle with the audience as they invariably replied with a candor that normally escapes adults. The show worked because the kids in their innocence often said things that polite adults would never think of saying, telling the truth in a way that revealed as much about our world and our culture as it did about them.

Something like that happens in today’s reading from Acts. The scene begins with Philip, a Greek-speaking Jewish Christian that we meet a chapter earlier when he’s put in charge of the first century equivalent of a Jerusalem-based “meals-on-wheels” program, until persecution forces him to flee to neighboring Samaria. Suddenly unemployed, Philip decides that preaching beats waiting tables any day, and before long he is a smashing success. Luke, the author of Acts, says that on his first try Philip succeeds in leading an entire metropolis to Christ! Today’s reading picks up right after that, as Philip, straight on the heels of a crusade that would have made Billy Graham jealous, is given his next big assignment from God. After Samaria, we might have suspected Philip was destined for evangelical stardom. After Samaria, he’d be sent to another city, maybe someplace a little larger, someplace like Jerusalem, then maybe Athens, perhaps even Rome, working his way up to bigger and bigger preaching gigs, reaching more and more people with the gospel, making a bigger and bigger name for himself. But God apparently had other ideas, other plans for Philip. For Philip is now commanded by the angel to take a road south of Jerusalem, a road few people went, into the desert, a place most people avoid, at noon, a time when nobody should be on the road.

This should have put an immediate end to Philip’s hopes of making it into the preachers’ Hall of Fame....except that there *was* somebody there on that road that day, *an Ethiopian eunuch*. Not exactly the kind of audience Philip was expecting, much less hoping for. Which is probably why the Spirit has to command him to run after the chariot when he probably would have just waited for the next ride, thank you very much. But run he does, and finding the eunuch reading from the prophet Isaiah, he rather boldly asks this guy if he knows what he’s reading. And when Philip learns he doesn’t, he starts preaching. And once again he’s *good*, so good in fact that the eunuch is immediately converted. And then that’s when the question comes. Flushed with newfound faith, the eunuch asks this innocent question: “Look, here is some water. What is to prevent me from being baptized?” Converts say the darndest things...

Now, if someone had put this question to Philip a couple of days ago, back in Samaria, in a hypothetical kind of way: “So, Phil, let’s just say you give up the urban ministry gig and you find yourself on this deserted highway at noon, and you come across this eunuch from, I don’t know, Ethiopia. And, say, he really starts to show an interest Jesus. Would you baptize him, do you think so?” Had Philip been asked that question before today, you know the answer: probably *not*. Because the truth of the matter is that just about everything should have prevented this guy from being baptized. He’s not a Jew, not even a Samaritan, not even a man, as his castration has

removed him from the ranks of what is normal or even natural, such that he wouldn't have even been allowed to step foot in the temple to worship. But now, today, things look different. How can they not, as pretty much everything since Samaria has gone completely contrary to what Philip might have planned. Astute readers of scripture would recognize immediately that means God's probably at work. I mean, come on, a couple of days ago, Philip was the talk of the town. And now he's out in the middle of nowhere, having a come-to-Jesus chat with an *Ethiopian eunuch*, and all of a sudden there's water flowing in the middle of the desert! You catch that little detail? They're riding through the desert and they come across some water...?!? Suddenly the answer to the eunuch's question is obvious, surprising but obvious, so obvious that Philip cannot muster any objection. He just shuts up and heads for the water.

Now it occurs to me that reading this story, we could go in a couple of different directions here. I mean, some preachers might use this start a discussion about infant baptism, as this verse has proved very helpful to those wanting to make the case that babies can be baptized, not just adults. Since little of the New Testament seems to offer direct scriptural support for it, we might find this story an important resource for that debate: "As was the case with Philip, so should we not put any hindrance in the way of anyone to be baptized." We could go that route, but I'm figuring that the question of the proper age of eligibility for baptism is probably not been at the top of your lists of concerns this morning.

Alternatively, we could talk about how the Spirit, in plucking Philip out of Samaria and landing him in the chariot with someone so different from him, instigated the first truly cross-culture missionary effort. We might ponder then where the Spirit is blowing the church today and to what people our church is called to minister the Gospel. We might reflect on the hindrances we put in the way of others that prevent them from receiving the Good News. We could go that route, but to tell you the truth I don't really want to go there today. That subject needs to be part of a much larger conversation. A conversation for another day.

Rather, what I really want to know is what's hindering *you*? What's preventing you from being the Christian God is calling you to be? For the question the eunuch raises, "what is to prevent from being baptized?" is not simply about participating in the sacrament of baptism, but about sharing in the new life opened to us in the Resurrection. In this way, the eunuch's question about being baptized becomes a challenge to us who have been baptized already: What's getting in your way, bogging you down, tying you up, stopping you from fully participating in God's mission of salvation?

Now, please don't whine to me about how you're too old to be of any use to God...and here I'm talking to those of you under the age of 60; or don't start complaining about all the time it takes to raise your kids...and here I'm talking about those over 70. No, I want to get a little deeper than that. What are those things really, deep down, that are preventing you from trusting God's promises and, believing them, from living them out? Fear, shame, doubt, insecurity, self-loathing, an uncertain future, a checkered past, keenly remembered disappointments or failures, remote or unlikely hopes? What is it?

Well, whatever it is, return with me for just a moment to Luke's account in Acts, but not just the eighth chapter any more, because this question of preventing and hindering comes up in a number

of places in the book. And each time the question is raised, the unspoken, implied, even obvious answer is the same. Here in chapter 8, the question is innocently “What should prevent me from being baptized?” And the implied answer is: nothing. Then in Acts 10, after Peter, Cornelius and some Gentiles witness the unthinkable happening before their very eyes—God pouring out the Holy Spirit upon them—Peter asks, “Can anyone refuse—literally, hinder—water for baptizing these people?” Implied answer: no, no one can. Then chapter 11, Peter again, defending his decision to baptize gentiles, after telling the story, asks “And who was I to hinder God?” Implied answer: nobody. Then, we see it one last time, at the very end of the book, the last sentence, the last *word* in fact. This time it’s not a question but a declaration, as Luke, writing of Paul’s imprisonment in Rome, concludes his story of the work of the Holy Spirit and the spread of the church, by writing, “And Paul lived there for two whole years at his own expense and welcomed all who came to him, proclaiming the Kingdom of God and teaching about the Lord Jesus Christ, with all boldness and *with no hindrance*.” Throughout Acts, you see, Luke testifies that nothing and no one can prevent God from accomplishing his purposes.

It may take a while, but God’s will in the end will be accomplished, though often in ways that surprise us or don’t make sense to us at first. Take the eunuch’s conversion for example. What probably neither the eunuch nor Philip realizes is this whole encounter had been centuries in the making. The eunuch’s baptism and inclusion among God’s people was the realization, not just of Jesus’ promise that the gospel will spread to all nations, but of an even older prophecy, one that goes back five hundred years to the prophet Isaiah. In fact, had the eunuch kept reading, he would have come across it himself just a few chapters after the passage he had been reading.

There in chapter 56, Isaiah prophesies that God will gather the entire household of Israel for worship, including both “eunuchs” and “foreigners”:

Let not the foreigner who has joined himself to the LORD say, "The LORD will surely separate me from His people." Nor let the eunuch say, "Behold, I am a dry tree." For thus says the LORD, "To the eunuchs who keep My sabbaths, [such as the Ethiopian eunuch did by going to Jerusalem to worship] and who do what pleases me, and who hold fast to my covenant, to them I will give in my house and within my walls a memorial, and a name better than that of sons and daughters; I will give them an everlasting name which will not be cut off.

In the Ethiopian eunuch this prophecy has been fulfilled, five hundred years after it was spoken. As an Ethiopian, this man was a foreigner, an outsider, and as eunuch, doubly so, separated from the normal life, not able to have family, prevented from being a part of God’s covenant people by his condition. And yet by God’s grace, meted out by Philip, this foreign eunuch has not been eternally “cut off” but has found himself joined to a new family, in the church. In fact, as tradition has it, the Ethiopian eunuch returned home and became an evangelist in his own right, establishing what would become the Ethiopian church, one of the oldest churches in the world. He may have thought himself a “dry tree,” but here in the desert this “dry tree” becomes fruitful. And his spiritual children still remember him, as do we, almost 2000 years later. This just goes to show that nothing can hinder God’s purposes in the end—not for the star-struck Philip, for the overzealous Peter, or for this foreign eunuch. And if not with them, then God will also not be hindered in accomplishing His purposes in and through the likes of you and me.

God can make a way when it seems there is no way. Don't believe me? Ever heard the name Damon West? West had a perfect life on paper: loving family, star quarterback, promising career. But beneath it all was a serious addiction problem that had begun at a young age. First it was pot and alcohol, then cocaine, and finally meth. The meth led to continuous theft on West's part, until he got caught. While in prison, he got clean, surrendered to God, and stayed out of trouble. Seven years later, West made parole. And ever since then, he's been telling his story and has been invited to schools, sports teams, and prisons to inspire and motivate others to turn their life around. He's even started teaching a class on criminal justice at the University of Houston downtown. So if God can use someone like West, a drug addict and criminal, then he can use someone like you, think of what God can do with you.

So the next time you find yourself trucking down the desert road, and getting nowhere fast, whether that happens by the bedside of a loved one or when you get that phone call with the test results or when you're at a place where you're struggling to figure out what to do with the rest of your life, wherever.... 'Cause, right, it doesn't matter where, we all know it's gonna happen... the next time you're on the desert road to nowhere, take heart, because things may be impossible for humans but all things are possible with God and nothing can hinder the Spirit of God, the Spirit that raised Jesus Christ from the dead, nothing and no one can hinder the Spirit from accomplishing that surprising, disturbing, world-upsetting work that God has in mind for you. So, go in peace to serve the Lord, knowing that God's purposes will not be hindered, but will be realized in and through you. Thanks be to God!