

## **Acts 8:26-40:**

### **Introduction:**

People of God!

I'm excited about today's passage. Really, really excited about it. It's not been as, oh, important to me as the Acts 2 passage was that we looked at a couple of months ago, the one that showed the Church upending economics as they knew it, and living a radically community-oriented life.

Today is a powerful passage. In some ways it's so powerful because of what we read past as we read it. Today's passage is one where an outsider, filled with longing to be on the inside, finally realizes he can be. If you've never felt on the outside of things, or wanted something there was no possible way for you to have, then today's passage might be hard to connect with. I'm not too worried about that, though.

Let's pray that God can connect what we see with what it is we might need to hear today.

### **Prayer:**

**Starting:**

Today's scene starts this way:

***26 Now an angel of the Lord said to Philip, "Go south to the road—the desert road—that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza."***

There's something so engaging about this. An angel sends Philip on his way. God is behind whatever happens next. Whatever happens next isn't accidental. This is a hook, man: What's going to happen on that road?

Philip heads out, no hesitation, and we read:

***27...and on his way he met an Ethiopian[a] eunuch, an important official in charge of all the treasury of the Kandake (which means "queen of the Ethiopians"). This man had gone to Jerusalem to worship, 28 and on his way home was sitting in his chariot reading the Book of Isaiah the prophet. 29***

***On The Ethiopian Eunuch:***

There is so much going on here that is bigger than we realize. First of all, Ethiopic Christianity is as old a

tradition as Orthodox Christianity, Coptic or Egyptian Christianity, Roman Catholicism, any ancient Church. Judaism in Ethiopia is equally ancient. They were the second country, after Armenia, to make Christianity the State Religion, and their way of being Christian is very unlike ours, their understanding of what makes up Scripture is unique, it's a really wild, ancient Christian tradition.

And the Ethiopic tradition claims this man as its first convert. He was often, in the early Church given a name; Bachos. He was also associated with an African convert in Acts 13 who is named Simeon. Sometimes he was called Simeon Bachos, because, you know, combining is fun. But the Ethiopic Orthodox Church claims this man, which is fine.

There is a wrinkle in it, though. He could very well have not been ethnically Ethiopian, but rather Ethnically Kush, a Kushite. Kush was a kingdom that more or less covers present day Sudan, which more or less is just south of Egypt. For Luke and others, Ethiopian was a term to refer to Africans, and one Nigerian biblical scholar suggests the Greek word simply be translated that way. The reason that we would say he wasn't actually ethnically Ethiopian is

because “Kandake” is actually a technical Kushite term for “queen.”

Simeon Bachos was, in fact, the one in charge of Kush’s royal treasury, serving the Kandake of Kush. Not Queen Candice of Ethiopia. Ethiopia’s queen wasn’t named “Queen Queen.” Interestingly, though, old Ethiopic manuscripts replace “Kandake” with an Ethiopic word for “queen,” which is a way to claim Simeon Bachos as their’s, of course, and imply that he was in charge of their queen’s treasury.

Interesting stuff, right? Maybe never useful.

### ***On Being A Eunuch:***

More “useful,” whatever that means, is this: This man was almost certainly a eunuch in the most literal sense, someone who had been castrated. Eunuchs are used throughout the ancient world for important jobs in royal households for a couple of reasons. The first is that they were unlikely to have dynasties of their own, unlikely to be concerned about the future of biological children, which would have been a threat. So they were considered loyal. Also: They were almost always technically slaves, no matter how important they were. And they were also considered, by most

cultures, unclean. Not someone who you would get close to, because they were considered, simply, incomplete. Broken. And the ancient world, much like the modern world, avoids and despises those it considers less than whole, healthy, hearty.

But this man, Simeon Bachos: Let's characterize him: He's a slave. He's childless. He's incredibly powerful, in his own way, but isolated. He has never experienced sexual pleasure. He's got enormous responsibility, but few friends. He's famous in the place he's from; one of the Kandake's most important officials. But he's famous for his dismemberment, too.

And there's this: He worships God. He worships God as much as anyone in his situation can worship God. Which is not easy. He has freedom enough to travel to Jerusalem, but once he's there he can only enter the Court of Gentiles. We saw on Palm Sunday the way that court had been allowed to be given over to Temple economics by its priestly rulers. There's actually no reason to think that this has changed at all.

### ***On Being A Eunuch: Excluded***

But beyond just being a Gentile who is trying to worship God as best as he can, he's a Eunuch. Right

now, as he reads Isaiah 53, he knows what you and I have forgotten: He knows Deuteronomy 23:1, which says, “No one who has been emasculated by crushing or cutting may enter the assembly of the Lord.” He remembers what God told Moses to tell Aaron in Leviticus 21: ““For the generations to come none of your descendants who has a defect may come near to offer the food of his God. No man who has any defect may come near: no man who is blind or lame, disfigured or deformed; no man with a crippled foot or hand, or who is a hunchback or a dwarf, or who has any eye defect, or who has festering or running sores or damaged testicles.” This Gentile Eunuch knows, knows, that the God of the Old Testament is the true God, and yet...that there is no place for him among the People of God. There is no place for him anywhere: Powerful, but a slave; respected, but isolated; worshipping God, but as a third-class citizen, gentile *and* disfigured.

This is is life. It would be so, so hopeless. Except for one thing.

### ***On Being A Eunuch: Isaiah 56***

He’s sitting there, reading Isaiah 53--it’s one of my favorite chapters in one of my favorite sections of

Scripture. And maybe this Eunuch's favorite section of Scripture, because it gives him hope. It's part of a long, long passage that talks about what the world will be like when God makes good on all his promises to Israel. The whole section is full of broad, huge, hopeful promises. Isaiah 53 is all about the Suffering Servant, whose own suffering will result in all sorts of promises that pour out after him: Isaiah 54 about promises to Zion, talking about barren women; 55 to the poor, declaring: "Come, all you who are thirsty, come to the waters; and you who have no money, come, buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money and without cost."; 56 declares, "Let no foreigner who is bound to the Lord say, "The Lord will surely exclude me from his people."

And let no eunuch complain, "I am only a dry tree."

The Eunuch has read Isaiah 53 before, almost certainly. He knows what follows from this suffering servant's life and murder, what's to come after on account of this Servant. He knows Isaiah 56's promise:

***Let no foreigner who is bound to the Lord say,  
"The Lord will surely exclude me from his  
people."***

***And let no eunuch complain,***

***“I am only a dry tree.”***

The Eunuch has been reading these passages, spending time in this section of Isaiah. Isaiah 56 continues, “

***“To the eunuchs who keep my Sabbaths,  
who choose what pleases me  
and hold fast to my covenant—  
5 to them I will give within my temple and its  
walls***

***a memorial and a name  
better than sons and daughters;  
I will give them an everlasting name  
that will endure forever.***

***6 And foreigners who bind themselves to the  
Lord***

***to minister to him,  
to love the name of the Lord,  
and to be his servants,  
all who keep the Sabbath without desecrating it  
and who hold fast to my covenant—***

***7 these I will bring to my holy mountain  
and give them joy in my house of prayer.  
Their burnt offerings and sacrifices  
will be accepted on my altar;***

***for my house will be called  
a house of prayer for all nations.”***

I think this is the hope that keeps the Eunuch going. The idea that God has had a change of mind, that what it means to be God’s People will someday include him, this most truly triple-outsider, Foreigner, African when most God-fearers weren’t, Gentile to begin with, a Eunuch, explicitly excluded from worshipping God. But hold him in your mind: in his outsidersness, in his isolation, in the certainty that when he dies, he leaves no child behind him, no legacy. He has so much power, and he uses what freedom he has to go worship a God he can only hope someday he might be able to get closer to. He is heartbreaking and inspiring to me in equal measure.

***Do you understand?***

And He’s reading aloud from Isaiah 53.

***The Spirit told Philip, “Go to that chariot and stay near it.” 30 Then Philip ran up to the chariot and heard the man reading Isaiah the prophet. “Do you understand what you are reading?” Philip asked.***

We realize that whatever powerful thing is happening requires not only Philip's obedience to God--listening to the Angel, listening to the Spirit. But it also requires Philip to make a second choice, not simply to obey, but to engage when he feels he ought to. God sets Philip up, but Philip has to choose to act.

We don't hear the Spirit telling Philip to reach out to this man. But Philip, having obeyed God so far, is sensitive to the opportunities around him. He engages with the man because he's paying attention, and realizes this is why he is here.

We need to realize that God's hopes for us require us to act, too. We should ask ourselves how sensitive we are to the opportunities we might be given. Our first choice is always obedience, whether it's basic things we know we ought to do, or some amazing mandate that we and no one else has been personally given. The second thing that's asked of us, though, is to respond to the situation we're in with an eye toward what God might want from us. Philip hears Scripture being read, and knows this is the reason he is here; in choosing to approach the caravan, he's making it the reason he's here.

Simon Bachos is reading out loud; this wasn't uncommon. It was typical. We read "to ourselves," in our heads, when we do whatever sort of devotional or studying reading we do. But that's not the way Christianity has generally done things. And we have to notice, again, this guy is someone: He's probably reading the Greek version of the Old Testament; he would have to know Greek to function in his official capacity. He may be reading the Hebrew version. Either way, this speaks to his capacity, his determination, and his intellect.

Philip asks if he understands what he's reading. The question comes, apparently, with the implication that Philip can explain it to him. The Official invites Philip to sit with him, with the implication Philip teach him. And Philip does sit with him, which is a crazy thing, too, because...a faithful Israelite ought not be near him, this foreigner, who would certainly be known to be a Eunuch in that society. We read:

***32 This is the passage of Scripture the eunuch was reading:***

***A Reliable Passage:***

And listen to this passage that the Eunuch, in all his

tensions, wealthy but a slave, isolated but commanding others, loving God but forced by God to keep his distance, and knowing he'll never have descendants himself, but hoping in Isaiah 56's promise that God will give him, somehow, "a memorial and a name better than sons and daughters." This is what he's reading out loud:

***"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."***

This passage must have resonated so much with this Eunuch. He has been humiliated in his castration; he has no descendants. He can't open his mouth against the Kandake, because for all his power, he's a slave who can be killed any moment. He knows, from his question to Philip, that this must be about an individual; I find it hard to believe he hasn't individualized it himself, the same way we read ourselves into these biblical characters' situations all the time. When he asks Philip, "Tell me, please, who is the prophet talking about, himself or someone else?" I

wonder if he wondered if maybe this passage was about him, somehow.

But Philip takes this opportunity that has been given to him by the Spirit, by the Angel, and by the openness of the Eunuch.

***Nothing In The Way:***

***35 Then Philip began with that very passage of Scripture and told him the good news about Jesus. 36 As they traveled along the road, they came to some water and the eunuch said, “Look, here is water. What can stand in the way of my being baptized?”***

Philip tells him all about Jesus, and about how baptism is the entrance ceremony into this relationship with God. Perhaps he tells him about how Jesus himself talked about being celibate for God’s sake as he identified with those who “become Eunuch’s for the sake of the Kingdom of God.”

And when Simeon the Official asks what it is that could keep him from being baptized, I think he’s asking because he is so used to being kept from God. He’s legitimately wondering: Is there something that can

keep me from being baptized? He's wondering if this Isaiah 56 hope that he must have held on to is actually about to come true.

There's a verse that our earliest, best manuscripts don't have at this point. It's probably the case that later scribes wanted to make sure that we all know there are some standards for trusting your life to Jesus. Later manuscripts add this:

***Philip said, "If you believe with all your heart, you may." The eunuch answered, "I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God."***

This is good theology, right? I believe! The earliest manuscripts allow the Eunuch's actions to stand in for his words, which I really, really appreciate. And we read this:

***...he gave orders to stop the chariot. Then both Philip and the eunuch went down into the water and Philip baptized him. 39 When they came up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord suddenly took Philip away, and the eunuch did not see him again, but went on his way rejoicing. 40 Philip, however, appeared at Azotus and***

***traveled about, preaching the gospel in all the towns until he reached Caesarea.***

***Exclusion & Embrace:***

Philip is miraculously transported to Azotus. Ashdod, really: West of Jerusalem, on the coast of the Mediterranean. He'll head north, preaching as he goes. The Eunuch went on his way rejoicing. Back to Kush and the Kandake, ready to read Scripture in a new way. There's no mention that he hasn't had the Holy Spirit come upon him, that he needed an Apostle to confirm him. Assumedly he has. If he is the Simeon of Acts 13, well: he probably wasn't. But Simeon clearly has the Spirit.

The Eunuch will go back home to the same life he's been living, but seeing himself completely differently: As one invited in, as one embraced. He'll read Scripture with new eyes, and learn about Jesus, and live in light of the promise that Isaiah 56 has come true in Jesus: He will have "an everlasting name that will endure forever."

Look: Jesus is for people with broken hearts. Jesus is for people who are outsiders. Jesus is for people who really want to know God, and have hope that God

wants to know them, too, and might someday.

Israel was mandated a way of life that was, by and large, exclusive. There were ways outsiders, ways the broken, could approach God, but they could never be full members of God's People, never get as close to God as humans were meant to get. It was not a permanent mandate; it was never forever. It was a purposeful whittling down, a sharpening of Israel so that God could work through them for the blessing of all creation, and all humanity alongside them. Exclusion was unfortunate and necessary, but always, always temporary.

Forever was this: That Eunuchs who were Africans who were Slaves--triple outsiders to those Jerusalem Insiders--who could travel freely in a caravan and were in charge of all their Queens' treasure but were still utterly isolated and could have no relationships or relations of their own, that ones like this could draw as close to God as they wanted, because God had drawn close to them. The idea that someone so far outside the fold could just freely follow Jesus even freaked out later scribes, who wanted to make sure we knew that the Eunuch assented to all the correct propositions before being baptized.

***The Eunuch's Response:***

Listen: Grace is overwhelming to those who long for it, God's love is a wonder to those who long for it, the promises that God makes sustain those who have been waiting for them to come true. The Eunuch was alone in his power; isolated in his authority; excluded from God's People despite all the extra effort he made to worship a God whose own people were blind to Him. And when Philip revealed to the Eunuch that it was Jesus who knew what it was like to feel what he felt, he was ready to give his life to this God in the flesh, who he'd always hoped for.

What he was longing for came so easily to those priests who were born into it; but they treated their privilege like garbage, while God treated the effort he made like the treasure it was. The Eunuch's own treasured hopes were unwrapped and presented to him as his rewards.

And after a lot of thinking about it, what I want to ask us most truly is this:

Can we identify with this Eunuch in any way? Can we see ourselves in him in anyway? Anyway at all?

Whether in the longing he had that his life would matter? Or in the isolation he felt? Or in his hope that God would complete his promises? Or in his effort to get as close to God as he was able? In his slavery, or his great, restricted power, or his wonder that nothing could stop him being baptized?

The truth is that the Eunuch's gift to us is his reminder that no matter how faithful we are, God is more faithful, no matter how good things are, what God offers us is better, and no matter how bad things are, we are not forgotten and won't be abandoned. I'd invite us to identify with him in whatever we're able, and in that identification, allow God to open us up to whatever it is we need.