

Fifth Sunday of Easter

LOOK, IT'S HAPPENING RIGHT NOW!

Acts 8:26-40

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Analysis by Cathy Lessmann

26But an angel of the Lord said to Philip, "Rise and go toward the south to the road that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza." This is a desert road. 27And he rose and went. And behold, an Ethiopian, a eunuch, a minister of the Can'dace, queen of the Ethiopians, in charge of all her treasure, had come to Jerusalem to worship 28and was returning; seated in his chariot, he was reading the prophet Isaiah. 29And the Spirit said to Philip, "Go up and join this chariot." 30So Philip ran to him, and heard him reading Isaiah the prophet, and asked, "Do you understand what you are reading?" 31And he said, "How can I, unless some one guides me?" And he invited Philip to come up and sit with him. 32Now the passage of the scripture which he was reading was this:

*"As a sheep led to the slaughter
or a lamb before its shearer is dumb,
so he opens not his mouth.
33In his humiliation justice was denied him.
Who can describe his generation?
For his life is taken up from the earth."*

34And the eunuch said to Philip, "About whom, pray, does the prophet say this, about himself or about some one else?" 35Then Philip opened his mouth, and beginning with this scripture he told him the good news of Jesus. 36And as they went along the

road they came to some water, and the eunuch said, "See, here is water! What is to prevent my being baptized?" 38And he commanded the chariot to stop, and they both went down into the water, Philip and the eunuch, and he baptized him. 39And when they came up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord caught up Philip; and the eunuch saw him no more, and went on his way rejoicing.40But Philip was found at Azotus, and passing on he preached the gospel to all the towns till he came to Caesarea.

Author's Note: In order to appreciate this story, it helps to be familiar with the stunning prophetic vision related in Isaiah 56:1-8. Turns out, this Acts incident is the literal "fulfilling" of that vision (think promise)—in living color! I am absolutely indebted to Paul Jaster for his marvelous crossing of [that](https://crossings.org/theology/2014/theolo10034old.shtml) vision, (<https://crossings.org/theology/2014/theolo10034old.shtml>) and also for his study of Mark published as Thursday Theology #711 called "Mission in Mark, Part 2" (<https://crossings.org/thursday/2012/thur012612.shtml>). Please, read both before you even glance at this below, and frankly, you can then do your own crossing.

DIAGNOSIS: Insiders Separated from Outsiders

Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem) : *Separations, Separated*

It's not just geographical and cultural distances that separate people from each other and ruin "community." It's much more subtle than that: It's those inner feelings of superiority/inferiority lodged within which make distinctions between who is "in" and who is "out." The Jewish establishment had created strict hierarchical rules that measure everyone's worth: temple priests were at the top, foreign eunuchs

(mutilated people) were at rock bottom. Considering such biases, it's surprising that Philip doesn't protest the Spirit's prodding to go talk to an Ethiopian eunuch! Are we moderns any different? Haven't events in Ferguson caused us to confront the maybe-not-so-subtle ways that we too measure others, this time based on race? But then, think of all the others we separate ourselves from weighing and measuring them: gays and lesbians, the unemployed, the chronically poor, the mentally ill, illegal immigrants, the homeless. Why, we virtuous Christians could get contaminated if we got too close to the likes of them. Better to stay separate and "above" it all.

Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem) : *Trusting Insider Status*

Truth is, we do love our scales. That's because we assume they can guarantee our weighty insider status not just among folks, but even, especially, with God. Such measures allow us to feel "good" about ourselves, especially as we compare ourselves to others. They allow us to conclude that indeed, we count, we measure up—and we assume that God is equally impressed.

Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem) : *On the Outs with God*
Whether you are weighed and found lacking or you measure up, it all ends in separation, and that is lethal, not only on the social level but especially the cosmic level. To all insiders' chagrin, it seems God doesn't operate via weights and measure. He's just not impressed. Rather, he turns the tables, holds us accountable for daring to usurp his position (as judge) and supposing that the scales could possibly guarantee our "in-ness" with him. The end result is humiliation coupled with a complete reversal of fortune: Not beloved insiders, but rejected outsiders—put there by our own weights and measures now used against us by Almighty God.

PROGNOSIS: Outsiders Become Insiders—Right Now!

Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution) : *The Outsider Who Reverses Everything*

The Ethiopian is reading a passage from Isaiah 56:1-8, which envisions a stunning reversal of the insider/outsider phenomenon, on a cosmic scale. God, the vision prophesies, is going to turn the tables upside down (remember Jesus turning the tables in the temple, citing Isaiah 56 accusing the temple authorities of becoming separatists?). He is going to rectify the separation problem once and for all by sending a special someone to rescue all outsiders—and get this, even outsiders put there by God himself! And once he's accomplished that, you're going to see such radical inclusion that the most impossible thing you can imagine is going to happen: rock-bottom foreign eunuchs are going to become temple priests! Luke must have danced a happy jig when he recorded this made-for-Hollywood account of Philip and the Ethiopian eunuch literally dramatizing the fulfillment of Isaiah's mind-blowing vision. To wit, Philip explains that the "special someone" Isaiah foretold had recently arrived, in the person of Jesus, and that in fact he had just accomplished his mission. Philip explains that Jesus became the ultimate outsider, Jesus suffered "humiliation," was "led to the slaughter"; Jesus' "life was taken up from the earth," that finally with Jesus' resurrection, all outsiders are invited "in" with God.

Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution) : *Led by the Holy Spirit*

When the eunuch asks Philip to whom Isaiah is referring, "Philip opened his mouth, and beginning with this scripture he told him the good news of Jesus" (v. 35). Luke doesn't state the obvious, but we can, namely, that upon hearing that good news, the eunuch believes it and asks to be baptized, meaning he will receive the Holy Spirit too! In fact, the Holy Spirit has been directing

Philip's movements from the beginning of this narrative, first sending him south (south, towards Gaza, e.g. "the ends of the earth"), then prompting him to approach the eunuch, then swooping him up and delivering him to other ends-of-the-earth places.

Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution) : *Rejoicing on the Way*

You can see Luke constructing this episode to be the literal carrying-out of Jesus' directive in Acts 1:8: "You will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth." And guess what? Those ends-of-the-earth people, perpetual outcasts, the world's outsiders, respond to their new insider status, not with smugness, but with deep gratitude and great joy. And... a warning: Don't be surprised when the Holy Spirit swoops you up too and plops you into an ends-of-the-world situation. Remember, all you need to do, like Philip, is open your mouth and tell the good news of Jesus.