

What is to prevent me?  
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 Old Stone Presbyterian Church ~ Lewisburg, West Virginia  
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**Acts 8:26-40**

<sup>26</sup>Then an angel of the Lord said to Philip, "Get up and go toward the south to the road that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza." (This is a wilderness road.) <sup>27</sup>So he got up and went. Now there was an Ethiopian eunuch, a court official of the Candace, queen of the Ethiopians, in charge of her entire treasury. He had come to Jerusalem to worship <sup>28</sup>and was returning home; seated in his chariot, he was reading the prophet Isaiah. <sup>29</sup>Then the Spirit said to Philip, "Go over to this chariot and join it." <sup>30</sup>So Philip ran up to it and heard him reading the prophet Isaiah. He asked, "Do you understand what you are reading?" <sup>31</sup>He replied, "How can I, unless someone guides me?" And he invited Philip to get in and sit beside him. <sup>32</sup>Now the passage of the scripture that he was reading was this:

*"Like a sheep he was led to the slaughter,  
 and like a lamb silent before its shearer,  
 so he does not open his mouth.*

<sup>33</sup> In his humiliation justice was denied him.

*Who can describe his generation?*

*For his life is taken away from the earth."*

<sup>34</sup>The eunuch asked Philip, "About whom, may I ask you, does the prophet say this, about himself or about someone else?" <sup>35</sup>Then Philip began to speak, and starting with this scripture, he proclaimed to him the good news about Jesus. <sup>36</sup>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?" [<sup>37</sup>And Phillip said, "If you believe with all your heart, you may." And he replied, "I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God."] <sup>38</sup>He commanded the chariot to stop, and both of them, Philip and the eunuch, went down into the water, and Philip baptized him. <sup>39</sup>When they came up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord snatched Philip away; the eunuch saw him no more, and went on his way rejoicing. <sup>40</sup>But Philip found himself at Azotus, and as he was passing through the region, he proclaimed the good news to all the towns until he came to Caesarea.

Peter and John have returned to Jerusalem,<sup>1</sup>  
 but God has another path in mind for Philip.

<sup>1</sup> It's more difficult than usual footnoting today's sermon.

Notes have been placed where I have relied directly on content from a source, but for the most part my sources are informing and not referenced directly:

William H. Willimon, *Acts*, (Atlanta: John Knox Press), 1988, pp. 71 – 72.

Leander E. Keck, New Testament Editor, *New Interpreter's Bible Commentary*, Volume X, "Acts" by Robert W. Wall, (Nashville: Abingdon Press), 2002, pages 135-150.

J.R. Daniel Kirk [https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary\\_id=3633](https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=3633)

Coleman Baker [https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary\\_id=2445](https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=2445)

Mitzi J. Smith [https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary\\_id=1235](https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=1235)

D. Mark Davis <http://leftbehindandlovingit.blogspot.com/2012/05/silence-of-lamb-and-proclamation-of.html>

And... she goes in another direction, but this sermon from the Rev. Nadia Bolz Weber was good grist for the mill: <http://www.patheos.com/blogs/nadiabolzweber/2012/05/the-conversion-of-phillip-by-a-gender-transgressive-foreigner/>

And it starts in a way that would be unusual for us,  
 but isn't unusual for the book of Acts.  
 An angel of the Lord tells Philip to go south to the road from Jerusalem to Gaza.  
 And Philip.  
 Well.

Philip goes.  
 He doesn't give the angel the details of his busy schedule.  
 He doesn't ask about the wisdom of traveling a hot road in the middle of the day.  
 He doesn't ask the purpose of the request.  
 The angel of the Lord says, and Philip gets up and goes.  
 He got up and went.  
 To the road that the author, Luke,  
 tells us in parentheses, is the wilderness road.  
 Which is odd, because the road from Jerusalem to Gaza is pretty well known,  
 today and back in the day.  
 It wasn't a wilderness road.

This is a story cue. Because the hearers would have known the road, too.  
 Luke is telling the hearers that what's important isn't the road.  
 It's not what's next to the road.  
 Something else is going to happen and all of that other stuff is going to drift into the fog.  
 Let that go, and travel with Philip.

That's when we are introduced to the Ethiopian eunuch.  
 The description of the Eunuch is something of a Rorschach test for us,  
 what you notice says more about you than the picture itself.<sup>2</sup>  
 In our day, it's eunuch that gets more attention.  
 Often, though not always, this was a term to describe a man without some of the defining  
 characteristics of maleness.

In Luke's time, for Luke's listeners, this was not, really, what made the man notable.  
 Or interesting.  
 It was Ethiopian. Official. Treasury.  
 These words would have created much more intrigue than the biology of body parts. Someone  
 from Ethiopia, someone of high position,  
 would have been exotic in this land. Fascinating. Inspiring curiosity.

This man is not presented as someone who was shameful or scorned, but  
 Glamorous. Elevated. Dignified.  
 Deuteronomy would say that he couldn't worship in the temple,  
 but we are told he is returning from a pilgrimage to Jerusalem to worship.  
 Was he allowed in? We don't know.  
 He's on his way home when he and Philip meet.

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/Rorschach%20test>

That's when Philip and the man meet.

The angel commands Philip to run alongside the chariot,  
which Philip does, and when he does,

not only do we hope that Philip has long legs and lots of stamina,  
we find out that the Ethiopian is reading from the Bible. The Hebrew Bible.

Whatever has happened in Jerusalem has not swayed him from his devotion.

Apparently, while still running, Philip asks,

“Do you even understand what you are reading?”

It is a harsh question, the language tells us, filled with judgement.

Philip, not knowing what we know,

that this man has returned from a worship pilgrimage,

appears certain that this man must know nothing of scripture. <sup>3</sup>

Maybe he's tired of running.

Maybe he's irritated with the angel who sent him here.

Or maybe he simply has some prejudice deep within his heart.

But this isn't making sense to Philip at this point.

When the Ethiopian man invites Philip into the carriage with,

“How can I learn without someone to guide me?”

A friend told me about an encounter he had at an interfaith group in New York City where a Rabbi told him, “Whenever I ride the subway, I often see Christians sitting there reading their Bibles by themselves. As a Jew it is so strange to me that Christians think they can read the Bible by themselves without help!”

The Ethiopian man doesn't ask for help from Philip because he is ignorant,

He has just made a pilgrimage to Jerusalem.

He knows scripture.

He asks not because he is ignorant, but because he is wise.

Living faith is a communal act. A community event.

The words selected from Isaiah would have been known,

familiar to the people hearing,

Words from Isaiah about someone who is unjustly condemned and unjustly killed.

The lamb does not open his mouth, does not fight on the way to slaughter,

But Philip does open his mouth

And through the words of Isaiah teaches about Jesus.

Most literally, **“Yet Philip opening his mouth and beginning from these writings brought good Jesus news to him.”**<sup>4</sup>

Brought good Jesus news.

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<sup>3</sup> D. Mark Davis <http://leftbehindandlovingit.blogspot.com/2012/05/silence-of-lamb-and-proclamation-of.html>

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So convicted is the Ethiopian, that when he sees some water, he asks to be baptized.  
 He doesn't just ask to be baptized, he asks a question with a different slant,  
 "What is to prevent me from being baptized?"

And this is where the action of the text really is.  
 Not with Ethiopian.  
 Not with Eunuch.  
 Not with the Angel calling Philip to run alongside the chariot.

All of the interesting little points have been leading us hear, to something that was revolutionary, and transformative for the early Christian community.

And so **ISN'T** for us that most of us didn't even notice it.

"Is there anything to prevent me from being baptized?"

If you were Philip. Or Peter. Or James. Or Paul, your answer would most likely have been,  
 "Most certainly. There are several things."

You aren't Jewish  
 You violate Deuteronomic laws.  
 You aren't even a Gentile.

No doubt the man would have been certain he could not be baptized.  
 He wasn't Jewish.  
 Deuteronomic law forbade it.

So controversial was this request, that the next verse of scripture has thousands of pages written about it. Because it wasn't originally there. And many Bibles have removed it.

Verse 37.  
 On the PC USA website with the scriptures for today it's in brackets.  
 In your pew Bibles (page 154) it's placed in a footnote and there simply isn't a verse 37.

This request remained so controversial that even hundreds of years later the copy editors were tried to soften the blow by explaining that this was allowed because he made a profession of faith, a requirement not placed on the original text.

As Luke tells the story,  
 it goes directly to Philip baptizing the Ethiopian, being spirited away.  
 Holy spirited away.  
 The word here is the same one some people translate later as being raptured,  
 but Philip is only partially raptured  
 because he appears in another town and continues preaching and teaching.  
 The Ethiopian goes on his way, too, rejoicing.  
 As one commentator said, he saw Philip no longer because he didn't need to.

This story is most often described as a conversion story-  
the conversion of the Ethiopian.

But there are many, and I'm among them,  
who wonder if we haven't gotten that the wrong way around.  
Aren't they both being converted here?

The Ethiopian who is hearing about Jesus for the first time.  
And Philip, who is being opened to a new way of understanding God.  
Philip and the early church who were wrestling with their  
codes and expectations and rules and finding boundaries.  
Defining who's in by who's out and then God comes along to scrap that plan  
and put a new one in the place, a tent that is larger than any of us can imagine.  
A cascade of the waters of baptism that refuse to be contained  
rather than gates that can be opened or closed.

And the people listening,  
Who, even generations later,  
would have been uncomfortable with what happened,  
because it challenged what they thought  
about what God wants and how they understood the Bible to be speaking.

How might Christianity have been different.  
Would it have been here at all, if this man had clung to his certainty about what to expect and  
hadn't asked if there was a reason he couldn't be baptized?

If Philip had clung to his certainty rather than seeing the grace of God in this man's baptism.

How does our certainty keep us from the will and way of God?

I think about all of the stories I heard about Yankees growing up as a child in the south.  
That they were cold and unwelcoming. Didn't know what southerners knew about hospitality.  
Until I found myself in a pickle in Massachusetts at the age of 16 and needed help, and it  
was a group of Yankees that helped me. Without question or expectation, they put their jobs  
on the line and took me into their home until I could get back to my home, fed me with the  
most delicious blueberry muffins I have ever eaten. I was certain that would not have  
happened. But I was wrong.

I was certain, when I was younger, certain that everyone had the same opportunities I had, and  
that if you succeeded or failed it was up to you, that the world was equal, until I read the  
memoir of a Guatemalan woman. Met a Haitian man. And realized how wrong I had been.  
That not every child grows up seeing the same horizon.

Certain that it was never appropriate to ask a man out on a date. Until I knew that unless I did  
I would never see him again, and two years later we were married.

The greatest sins of my life have been, I believe, when I was certain.

So certain, I hadn't left room for God.

The thing is, it's hard to let go of certainty. For me. For many of you. It's security. It's comfort. It's a handrail in this fast moving world, a point of orientation.

But maybe we need to loosen our grasp.  
 Because certainty isn't what God promises us.  
 Our God is not a God of certainty, our God is a God of life. Of hope.  
 Of love that sends us forth rejoicing when it is opened in front of our eyes.  
 That we will most certainly miss if we are too certain to pay attention.

Because in the end, the Ethiopian is the one who is baptized,  
 But Philip is every bit as much converted, released to a bigger world view.  
 A God world view.

I'm not going to lie. It makes me nervous. Certainty is comfortable.  
 Knowing I was right in that fight.  
 Or that my directions were, in fact the correct ones.  
 Or that planning is far superior to playing things by ear.

How about for you?  
 Because I also know that lack of certainty is one of God's greatest gifts,  
 Uncertainty means God has room to work within me, within you, within us, too.

Just as another Angel of the Lord appeared to Mary,  
     a women God would certainly never choose,  
     to the Holy Spirit who will transform the most surprising band of disciples  
     Jesus certainly could have called,  
 we too, are a part of this story being called to open our mouths to proclaim the good news.  
 Not as a certain formula to salvation  
     but a pathway to grace and the Kingdom of God here on earth.

And for those of us who desire to go with God. To go on our way rejoicing, today is a reminder that to do so, we might need to loosen our grasps just a little, because God is not done with us yet.

Alleluia.  
 Amen.