

5 Easter YB 2024

## **Phillip in the Borderlands**

By the Rev. Salying Wong

The road from Jerusalem to Gaza is a wilderness road. Though the wilderness road runs into a space that is far from safety, it is where the Spirit likes to work. God propels Phillip, maybe like Superman in the air, south from Samaria and places him along the road to meet the Ethiopian Eunuch. This is much wilder than Phillip's imagination could imagine. In fact, he is bewildered as he watches the eunuch's chariot pass by. He sees a beardless, effeminate man holding a scroll and hears them speak with a prepubescent voice, reading the Prophet Isaiah. Though there is nothing else around, Phillip still does not see that the eunuch is the one whom God desires, the one to whom he is sent, the one whom God is drawing close to God's self and to Phillip's self. So the Spirit shakes him from his bewilderment, saying to Phillip, "Run after the chariot. Join it."

Earlier in the Book of Acts, after the resurrection, the disciples had gathered outside Jerusalem. As they witnessed Jesus ascending, they heard him say, "*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.*" (1:8) So they preached first in Jerusalem and then in Judea. As their preaching caught the attention of the religious authorities, particularly one named Saul, some were arrested, some were killed, and the rest were scattered by the Spirit.

The Spirit took Phillip first to Samaria. This was bad news: It was like jumping from the frying pan into the fire. When, traveling between the north and the south, the Jews would take long detours around Samaria to avoid conflict. The Jews hated the Samaritans; the Samaritans returned the favor. And yet, the Spirit said preach, and Phillip did. Shockingly, the Samaritans listened to Phillip preach with bated breath. The Spirit cracked open the

dividing wall of hostility and the Samaritans received the gospel. Even in Samaria. Could God do even more? Surely this is the imagination's limits.

And now, here, Phillip has landed in the wilderness. He encounters a sexually ambiguous person. "To the ends of the earth" will mean that Phillip witnesses to God's love and desire for this Ethiopian Eunuch even when what he sees makes him uneasy. Willie Jennings, in his commentary on the Book of Acts, says, "Disciples of Jesus must be convinced not only of God's love for the world but also God's desire for people, especially people we have been taught not to desire."<sup>1</sup>

In the eyes of the Ancient Near East, if there is desire for the Ethiopian eunuch, it would be for them as a tool and for their proximity to power. Castrated in adolescence, eunuchs, who could have been contenders to the throne, are now instruments of those in power. Their fate is locked with the fate of the ruler. If the ruler succeeds, then they succeed. If the ruler fails, then they will be killed. Our Ethiopian eunuch is "trusted" with Candace's treasury because they must remain loyal or they will die. They cannot father children; they cannot pass on their name; they have no future beyond themselves. Therefore, they are the ultimate slave. The Ethiopian eunuch is the perfect tool of one empire to another, from Candace's court to Caesar's court.

Moreover, the Ethiopian eunuch is a black Jew of the diaspora. Their blackness marks their position in the outer limits of the known world. Their castration makes them religiously outcast. So then, foreigner, sexually other, the ultimate slave, and religiously impure--they are the outcast of outcasts. **And God desires them.** God's dream for the church that is emerging in the Book of Acts is a dream where the eunuch is embraced.

When Phillip joins the Ethiopian eunuch in his chariot, he finds that they are reading from a scroll of the Prophet Isaiah (53:8):

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<sup>1</sup> Acts by Willie Jennings, p. 80

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

In his humiliation justice was denied him.  
Who can describe his generation?  
For his life is taken away from the earth.”

Why would the eunuch pause in this passage of all passages? You can almost hear them asking, “Is this about the prophet, is about someone else...or is it about me?” We don’t know what Phillip said, but I hoped he spent most of his time listening. I hope he asked, “Tell me, where are you in the passage?” And perhaps the eunuch was so moved that they could not speak for a while. But, eventually, Phillip heard the story of their suffering, of their exclusion, their stigmatization. Perhaps after listening, Phillip told them about what happened to Jesus and how he suffered and died. They were not alone; Jesus shared solidarity with them. This was comforting news. But it became good news when they learned that in Jesus' resurrection, they were being brought into belonging into the one household of God.

Perhaps Phillip told them to unroll the scroll further, to Isaiah 56:3-5:

*Let not the stranger who attaches himself to the Lord, say,  
Surely the Lord will separate me from his people: and let not the  
eunuch say, I am a dry tree. Thus saith the Lord to the eunuchs, as  
many as shall keep my sabbaths, and choose the things which I take  
pleasure in, and take hold of my covenant; I will give to them in my  
house and within my walls an honorable place, better than sons and  
daughters: I will give them an everlasting name, and it shall not fail.*

And so, after their delight in each other and their delight in the scriptures, the Ethiopian eunuch asks, “What is to prevent me from being baptized?” What is to prevent me from this rite of initiation of belonging? God's desire for the eunuch wells up like water and the eunuch responds with

proportional desire for God. What is to prevent the eunuch's belonging through baptism? Nothing. We hear the echo from the Book of Acts, *What I have made clean, do not call unclean.* (Acts 10:16)

The road from Jerusalem to Gaza runs through the human heart. The wilderness borderlands are those far parts of our imagination. Where could they be in your life, in your relationships, in yourself? Whom does God desire that leaves you uneasy? Let us run toward what we would rather run from and say yes when Spirit says, "Join them."