

May 2, 2021 5th Sunday after Easter
Rev. Jen Nagel, University Lutheran Church of Hope

Acts 8:26-40, 1 John 4:7-21,
John 15:1-8

[Matt Skinner in Working Preacher for the Acts text this week, May 2, 2021, including quote from Justo L. Gonzales Austen Hartke: https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLwWfCs7vnwdC1wblAmH3_klm0fE7oN9tE
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-fUZMA4OXCI&list=PLwWfCs7vnwdC1wblAmH3_klm0fE7oN9tE&index=5]

Would you pray with me:

May the words of our lips,
the meditations of our hearts,
the typing of our fingers,
the exchange in this faithful community,
be acceptable in your sight, O God, our water, our life. Amen

Grace and peace to you, beloved of Christ Jesus.

I realize fully that this morning we've got a great Gospel:

all that abiding, and the cool relational imagery of the vine and branches.
We've also got an irresistible story in our first reading from Acts.
Today we'll focus on that story, the story of the Ethiopian Eunuch.
Professor Matt Skinner from Luther Seminary writes about
the book of Acts with this text in mind:
"Acts, like Easter, urges you to put cautious rationality on the shelf and
follow an unrestrained God into the world."
Professor Skinner continues, "Both Acts and Easter want your imagination to run wild."

So dear friends, today I invite you to take a breath, and give your imagination some freedom.

I invite you to join me in an "I wonder, I notice" sermon focused
on this story that we call the Ethiopian Eunuch.
Really, I invite you to ponder God's curious ways of inviting us—all of us—into the promises,
into the love.

We'll use an I wonder, I notice sermon.

This style of interactive preaching is familiar to some of you and new to others.
And, it's adjusted when we do it on Zoom and live stream.
In an "I wonder, I notice" sermon, we're all... preachers.
We're all called to engage the scripture.

You've heard John Lauber read the lesson from Acts once already.

In a few minutes I'll read it again, slowly.

Your job is to interrupt me.

In the sanctuary, I'd ask you to interrupt me verbally.

Here in this weird virtual world, you who are on Zoom,
interrupt using the chat line.

Interrupt by **typing** a phrase that begins either

"I wonder... (whatever you wonder)" or "I notice... (whatever you notice)."

Our assisting minister Kirsten Mebust will amplify all that comes through the Zoom chat.

We aren't able to amplify the YouTube comments but those using YouTube can certainly add
comments that some of the other YouTube users will see.

Kirsten will do the verbal interrupting on behalf of the writers.

After Kirsten has interjected what is in the Zoom chat,

I'll continue reading the gospel until I'm interrupted again.

So today at the start, it may sound something like this:

"Then an angel of the Lord said to Philip..."

I notice that we've got angels in this story.

Or, *I wonder* what happened before this.

Remember, only two rules...

1. There are no wrong answers, let the Spirit lead us as a community.

You may feel like you don't know enough, but really those can be the best interruptions.

Your role is to add your typed interruption in the chat... It only works if people do it.

2. Use the structure.

Begin your typed interruption with *I wonder...* or *I notice...*

Ready? Give me a wave so I know we're together.

Fingers ready to type? God bless our wondering and our noticing.

READ Acts 8:26-40 SLOWLY...

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.)

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 and was returning home;
seated in his chariot, he was reading the prophet Isaiah.

Then the Spirit said to Philip, "Go over to this chariot and join it."

So Philip ran up to it and heard him reading the prophet Isaiah.

He asked, "Do you understand what you are reading?"

He replied, "How can I, unless someone guides me?"

And he invited Philip to get in and sit beside him.

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.*

In his humiliation justice was denied him.

Who can describe his generation?

For his life is taken away from the earth."

The eunuch asked Philip,

"About whom, may I ask you, does the prophet say this,
about himself or about someone else?"

Then Philip began to speak, and starting with this scripture,
he proclaimed to him the good news about Jesus.

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?"

He commanded the chariot to stop,

and both of them, Philip and the eunuch,
went down into the water,
and Philip baptized him.

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.

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.

[Lots of wondering and noticing add here.]

Thank you! Let's continue for a moment in this same spirit,
still using the "I wonder, I notice" structure, still typing in the chat line on Zoom...
What else do you notice? What else do you wonder?

[More added here...]

Your wondering, your noticing, they make this rich. Thank you.

This passage makes a great Bible Study and I'm going to resist the temptation to offer that.
You've already dug in deeply and we could do more study at a later time.
Rather, let me offer just few wonderings and noticing.

I notice the Eunuch's curiosity.

He is curious about scripture, so curious that he's traveled to Jerusalem to learn more.
Now he's bumping along in the chariot on the way home, still reading.
He is curious enough to welcome a conversation partner, and
curious enough to ask, "What is to prevent me from being baptized?"

I notice the edginess of this story—there are so many potential hurdles that could have
prevented this baptism, could have limited God's promise:
geography, religion, and race,
power, background, the Eunuch's status as a sexual minority.

But none of these become blocks.

Rather, this spirit of holy curiosity is present in the Eunuch's posture and in Philip's response.

Cuban-American historian and theologian Justo Gonzales writes,

"... we repeatedly see that the great movements,

the most notable discoveries of unsuspected dimensions of the gospel and of obedience to it,

usually appear not at the center but at the margins, at the periphery."

There is energy, Holy Spirit energy, on these margin.

I know that as a queer person.

I hear that from trans colleagues and friends.

I witness that in the work for racial equity and immigration reform all around us.

I notice how, when it comes time for the baptism, God takes care of things.

It's the Eunuch who orders the chariot to stop,

God who miraculously seems to provide the water,

Philip who goes along with it, with joy and energy.

Philip, part of the establishment, could have been a gatekeeper,

but instead there is this sense of God calling the eunuch, God opening opportunities.

Austen Hartke calls himself a Trans Scripture Nerd.

Echoing the Eunuch's question, Austen Hartke riffs,

"Is there anything—my sex, my gender, my ethnicity, my status—

is there anything that should keep me from becoming part of the body of Christ

and part of the family of Christ?"

Dear friends in Christ, that's the good news in today's scripture.

As Austen would say, "Once God calls you, you're called, there's not much anyone else can do about it."

Beloved ones, thank you for letting the Holy Spirit lead us, call us, this morning.

May holy imagination inspire you,

and may grace be your traveling companion. Amen.