

First Presbyterian Church
Acts 8:26-40, “A Surprising Gust of Wind”
by Pastor Matt Johnson, 5/2/2021

I’m going to open up with two stories about my boys:

The first one happened a few summers ago at my sister’s house
in Gig Harbor, WA. Her home is on the water,
and they have some paddle boards.

So Caleb was interested in paddle boarding and went out on the water.

I was staying with him for the most part, but then a surprising gust of wind
came up, and before I knew it Caleb was heading
further out into the water than I was comfortable with.

In fact he was heading further out into the water than *he* was comfortable with.

But the hard thing is that to get turned around without going
against the wind he had to paddle away from shore first
and then get turned back towards the shore where
he would be safe.

That’s not easy to do, and he made it in okay by the end,
but that gust of wind sent Caleb across an unseen boundary
that required him to learn a new way of operating.

The second story is about Micah back in Minneapolis
when he was first learning to play soccer.

It was an indoor soccer camp, and Micah knew that there were
lines on the floor that indicated where you could play
and where you couldn’t.

So as he was dribbling the ball along and lost control,
he would chase *right up to that line*.

And then he came to a screeching halt as he watched the ball
speed off into another court.

He didn’t want to cross that boundary, even if the ball did!

The passage we look at today from the book of Acts is a story like these.

In it the Holy Spirit arrives as a surprising gust of wind
and blows Philip into a situation he hadn't expected to find himself in.
In this story, the Spirit of the Living God is outside the lines
of the soccer field, and when the ball goes rolling out there,
we learn that the game doesn't stop!
Instead, it appears that the game is just beginning.

This is a story that calls us to identify the people, places, or topics
that we might believe to be out of bounds where the Holy Spirit
could call us into action.

It begins in v. 26 with a character named Philip.
Now back in chapter 6, the apostles told the other disciples
to select seven men filled with the Holy Spirit for a specific purpose:
to assist in distributing food to widows
who were of both Hebrew and Hellenistic descent,
which is to say, they were Jews and Greeks.

Well, this sounds like a focused enough task with good boundaries,
but one of those seven was Stephen who gave witness
to the story of Jesus before the Sanhedrin and was stoned and killed
as the first martyr of the church.

And another of those seven was Philip, who is also called by the Holy Spirit
into a ministry other than the original calling he was given in chapter 6.

And so it happened that an angel of the Lord gives a message to Philip.

We don't know if it was one of those magnesium bright white angels
or one of the young messenger appearing in a room angels,
or the voice in a dream variety, but it was the angel of the Lord –
and we know that in the New Testament
that means the Lord Jesus.

So Jesus' messenger tells Philip, "Go down the road, the desert road,
from Jerusalem to Gaza."

Okay, boss. No questions asked, Philip heads out down the road.

Now the road from Jerusalem to Gaza has a few boundaries in it today,
you know that. And they are dangerous to cross from time to time.
But at the time, I don't think Phillip would have necessarily
known he was going to be blown across a boundary.

Then he sees a group of travelers that certainly indicated
a social and cultural boundary: An Ethiopian eunuch
(and his traveling companions) moving down the same road.

There are some features about this individual that require some context:

- 1.) Ethiopian – this refers to the southern Nile area of Egypt
rather than the area we call Ethiopia today.
Nevertheless, it means this person held a distinct ethnic
and national identity that would have been
someone Philip wasn't familiar with.
- 2.) Eunuch – this is usually a male who has been castrated, but in Matthew 19,
Jesus says, "there are eunuchs who were born that way,
and there are eunuchs who have been made eunuchs by others—
and there are those who choose to live like eunuchs
for the sake of the kingdom of heaven."

Whatever means of arriving there, a eunuch is a person who held an accepted
role in ancient society with one caveat: Eunuchs were considered unclean
and thus were not allowed to offer sacrifices at the Jewish temple.

Claire Davidson Frederick writes in an essay on this passage,
"Eunuchs were often assigned the task of assisting royal women
or guarding the royal harem.
They could not establish a competing dynasty.

But their status as eunuchs also made them vulnerable to violence.

They could easily be replaced or killed without repercussion
because they had no sons to avenge their name.”

We don't have eunuchs today, but one wonders if there might be a correspondence
to some aspects of the LGBTQ community?

While there could be something there, we should remember
that identity and sexuality are largely culturally defined
and so there's no way to make a one-to-one comparison.

At any rate, this person being a eunuch could have presented a barrier for Philip.

3.) Position: in charge of all the treasury of the Kandake.

Again Clarie Davidson Frederick notes that

“This eunuch served Candace, queen of the Ethiopians,
as treasurer during one of the most prosperous times
in the ancient history of the kingdom of Cush.”

Being in charge of a queens finances is a thing of great honor
and considerable influence.

The high status of this individual could have been a barrier
for a common person like Philip.

4.) Speaking of money – this Ethiopian Eunuch has their own scroll of Isaiah!

That's unusual. I wonder how this Eunuch,
considered unclean by Temple law, acquired this precious,
hand-written papyrus scroll?

Given the length of Isaiah, it would have cost a fortune.

A person reading their own scroll aloud on a carriage
presents a boundary of both privacy and privilege.

Even with these four boundaries between Philip and this carriage rider,
the Spirit tells Phillip, “Go to that chariot and stay near it.”

When he does so, he hears the words of Isaiah 53 being read

– words that describe the servant of Yahweh suffering injustice and death.

Even with these barriers in place, it's Philip who breaks the ice!
"Do you understand what you are reading?" he asks.

And so begins a conversation that leads to Philip jumping up on this royal carriage
and sharing with this new acquaintance the story of Jesus
beginning with that very scripture.

Which is to say that what God has done in Jesus
is not a new thing that arrived apart from the Hebrew promises,
but a continuance that is intelligible from
within the heart of the Hebrew Bible.

And then they encounter some water and it's the eunuch who suggests a baptism!
They must have talked for quite a while, and the eunuch
must have found an acceptance
with Philip and the story of Jesus that was transformative.

So Philip baptizes this eunuch and immediately the Spirit takes Philip away.
Now this is not something I've ever experienced when doing baptisms,
and I don't see how its in any way necessary,
but ... that's what the good book says.

And so we are left to wonder: where are the people, places,
or topics that we might believe to be out of bounds
where the Holy Spirit could call us into action?

The life of the Spirit is highly active when we are crossing boundaries of
status, culture, ethnicity, language, gender, and politics.
Why? Because God is a God of reconciliation!
When we open ourselves to engage across these boundaries,
to be blown by a surprising gust of wind without
scrambling for familiar shores,
we open ourselves to the wonder and joy
of life on the road in the mission of God.