

Notes for Brian's Sermon at Brentwood Presbyterian Church

Sun, Apr 29, 2018

What Are You Reading? (Psalm 22:25-31 & Acts 8:26-40)



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.
(Acts 8:29-30a)

The story line of our passage/ text

As we have suggested, Acts is really the story of how God's Holy Spirit built the early church – the purpose around which the Spirit worked, the people who were drawn into the Spirit's circle of influence, the impact the grace of Jesus Christ had on them, the resistance and the indifference they encountered, and the persistent, resilient work God did to nourish the early church to flourish – let's look at this encounter between Philip and the Ethiopian minister of finance more carefully

Provocative Points to Ponder

- Imagine you're the high-ranking royal official from Ethiopia – you've just been to Jerusalem to negotiate some very big deals – you may even have Jewish roots yourself – and your trip may have re-ignited some interest in the deeper questions of life – you've picked up a scroll of the prophet Isaiah to read on the trip home – it's interesting, but confusing, stuff – so different from the African religious traditions within which you have been working for so many years – and then, to add to the confusion, you had picked up rumours in Jerusalem about this Jesus of Nazareth that a small band of reformers were claiming to be Yahweh's Messiah – the One in whom all the promises of the God of Abraham had been fulfilled – it all seemed ludicrous – especially the claims that he was risen from the dead – what rubbish! – and now what? – who's this mad man chasing after my chariot?
- Now imagine that you are Philip – one of the early church leaders who had been given a special responsibility for the care of the poor – you've had this hunch, a message from the Holy Spirit, as you understand it, to get onto the road going from Jerusalem to Gaza – you're not quite sure why, but then you hear someone reading aloud in Greek from the prophet Isaiah – “Like a sheep he was led to the slaughter, and like a lamb silent before his shearer, so does he 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.” (Is 53:7-8) – ah, that's why you're here – he's someone pondering the serious questions of life – you'll see if he wants to talk about the meaning of this passage
- And sure enough, he does – you talk with deep conviction and whatever clarity you can muster about how God saved the world in Jesus of Nazareth – not an imperial power imposing its will on people, but a suffering servant who died to take away the crushing

burden of our sins – a crucified rabbi who this Yahweh raised to usher in the promised commonwealth of justice and kindness – that's who you're reading about – that's who we're discussing

- Who knows how long the conversation was? – who knows what range of hopes and fears were covered as Philip and the finance minister explored the Scriptures together – frustratingly few details – but, in the end, the finance minister asked to be baptized – right there and then – and they went their separate ways – the finance minister home to Ethiopia rejoicing and Philip on to Azotus to continue preaching the gospel in the towns
- As with all great stories, this one suggests so many things – but two insights stuck with me this week as I pondered this passage – first, we are drawn to the gospel by our curiosity – by the deep questions of life – so it is important to listen for them both within ourselves and among our friends – second, it's important to work on ways to witness in words, as well as in deeds, to the gospel that makes us rejoice in the face of those deeper questions about life – maybe you will find a phrase in our Memorize and Ponder process, or in the sermon notes, or in one of our songs and hymns, or in your own devotional reading, or in a phrase in something else you are reading – pay attention to finding and practicing those words – you may not have to run after a chariot to use them, but the Spirit will create opportunities

Your Notes

Prayers of Thanks – that in the midst of sorrow over tragic, senseless deaths, you inspire first responders with courage and wisdom, that you attend those who grieve with solace, and that you stimulate in us the desire to nourish those within our circles of influence to flourish in the midst of suffering - (silence to consider this)

Prayers for Help – those whose lives have been devastated by death around the world this week to move through their mourning with gentleness and grace – those who are recovering from illness, operations, and incidents – we remember especially Rene, Joan, Ron, and Jean - (silence to consider this)

Prayers for Awe – at the ways you surprise us with deeper insights into your justice and kindness – and, far too often, at our stubborn resistance to accepting these gifts with humility - (silence to consider this)