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Acts 8:26–40, ESV.

²⁶Now an angel of the Lord said to Philip, “Rise and go toward the south to the road that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza.” This is a desert place. ²⁷And he rose and went. And there was an Ethiopian, a eunuch, a court official of Candace, queen of the Ethiopians, who was in charge of all her treasure. He had come to Jerusalem to worship ²⁸and was returning, seated in his chariot, and he was reading the prophet Isaiah. ²⁹And the Spirit said to Philip, “Go over and join this chariot.” ³⁰So Philip ran to him and heard him reading Isaiah the prophet and asked, “Do you understand what you are reading?” ³¹And he said, “How can I, unless someone guides me?” And he invited Philip to come up and sit with him. ³²Now the passage of the Scripture that he was reading was this:

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

*³³In his humiliation justice was denied him.
Who can describe his generation?
For his life is taken away from the earth.”*

³⁴And the eunuch said to Philip, “About whom, I ask you, does the prophet say this, about himself or about someone else?” ³⁵Then Philip opened his mouth, and beginning with this Scripture he told him the good news about Jesus. ³⁶And as they were going along the road they came to some water, and the eunuch said, “See, here is water! What prevents me from being baptized?” ³⁸And he commanded the chariot to stop, and they both went down into the water, Philip and the eunuch, and he baptized him. ³⁹And when they came up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord carried Philip away, and the eunuch saw him no more, and went on his way rejoicing. ⁴⁰But Philip found himself at Azotus, and as he passed through he preached the gospel to all the towns until he came to Caesarea.

Seeking.

I'd like to look at a story from the Book of Acts about two characters: Philip and a Eunuch. Here is what we know of Philip, from two chapters before our passage:

But as the believers rapidly multiplied, there were rumblings of discontent. The Greek-speaking believers complained about the Hebrew-speaking believers, saying that their widows were being discriminated against in the daily distribution of food.

²So the Twelve called a meeting of all the believers. They said, "We apostles should spend our time teaching the word of God, not running a food program. ³So, select seven men who are well respected and are full of the Spirit and wisdom."

They chose the following: Stephen (a man full of faith and the Holy Spirit), Philip, Procorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas, and Nicolas of Antioch (an earlier convert to the Jewish faith). ⁶These seven were presented to the apostles, who prayed for them as they laid their hands on them.

⁷So God's message continued to spread. The number of believers greatly increased in Jerusalem, and many of the Jewish priests were converted, too.

So apparently, as the Apostles were beginning to spread the Word after Jesus left the Earth, there were disagreements between Gentile and Jewish believers. It had to do largely with the distribution of food to the needy. To solve the conflict and to save the Apostles some time, they chose a group of seven, including Philip, to help manage the growing church. Later, Philip becomes an evangelist to the Samaritans, a group of people who were of mixed ethnicity, and part Jewish, and whom the Jews disapproved of because they believed that the Samaritans had perverted the Jewish faith. Then, in Acts 8, we have our story. Here is how it starts:

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was an Ethiopian, a eunuch, a court official of Candace, queen of the Ethiopians, who was in charge of all her treasure. He had come to Jerusalem to worship²⁸ and was returning, seated in his chariot, and he was reading the prophet Isaiah.

This is an intriguing story to us as modern people. Philip is going about his business of helping with the church and evangelizing. An angel appears before him. This tells us that this was a divine incident, initiated by God for a special purpose. The angel tells Philip how to go find a man from Ethiopia, a man who was apparently a powerful person in his home country: he controlled the treasure of the Queen. The Ethiopian had come to Jerusalem to worship, and he was on his way back home when the angel tells Philip to go find him. Now, why had a man from Ethiopia traveled all the way to Jerusalem to worship? This must be a reference to one of the major Jewish feasts, whereby believers were encouraged to travel to Jerusalem to worship in the Temple. This would have been an expensive and extremely time-consuming trip, and one fraught with danger, too. But he clearly wasn't a Jew: he was from Ethiopia, and we later learn that he didn't understand the Book of Isaiah, which he had been reading. This was a deeply spiritual man who had come to Jerusalem, to the land of the Jews, to learn about God. He was a seeker. He was on a spiritual journey. Next, Philip asks the Ethiopian about the Book of Isaiah:

“Do you understand what you are reading?”³¹ And he said, “How can I, unless someone guides me?” And he invited Philip to come up and sit with him.³² Now the passage of the Scripture that he was reading was this:

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Philip, as it turns out, is not a Hebrew name, but Philip was a Jew. Most likely, he was of Jewish decent, but had lived among Gentiles – which is probably why he was comfortable preaching to non-Jews. It has been suggested that his parents were broad-minded Jews who gave their son a Greek name, which happens to mean “*lover of horses*”. Philip jumps at the opportunity to teach the Ethiopian man about the Book of Isaiah. Although Isaiah wasn’t part of the Torah, the five most holy books of the Jews, it was part of the Tanakh, a collection of other holy books. For us, it’s intriguing that the Ethiopian was reading this particular passage. It talks about someone being led to the slaughter like a lamb, someone who was humiliated and denied justice. The Ethiopian is studying Isaiah 53:7-8:

⁷ *He was oppressed and treated harshly,
yet he never said a word.
He was led like a lamb to the slaughter.
And as a sheep is silent before the shearers,
he did not open his mouth.*

⁸ *Unjustly condemned,
he was led away.
No one cared that he died without descendants,
that his life was cut short in midstream.*

This passage from Isaiah is widely interpreted by Christians to be a foreshadowing of the suffering and death of Jesus. So, this man, who has come all the way from Ethiopia to learn about the Jewish God, ends up being introduced to the teachings of Jesus Christ by an evangelist sent by God. This is how the story ends:

³⁴The eunuch said to Philip, "About whom, I ask you, does the prophet say this, about himself or about someone else?" ³⁵Then Philip opened his mouth, and beginning with this Scripture he told him the good news about Jesus. ³⁶And as they were going along the road they came to some water, and the eunuch said, "See, here is water! What prevents me from being baptized?" ³⁸And he commanded the chariot to stop, and they both went down into the water, Philip and the eunuch, and he baptized him. ³⁹And when they came up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord carried Philip away, and the eunuch saw him no more, and went on his way rejoicing. ⁴⁰But Philip found himself at Azotus, and as he passed through he preached the gospel to all the towns until he came to Caesarea.

The eunuch is baptized by Philip. The story ends with something a little bizarre. Philip suddenly disappears and is transported to Azotus. This is a city north of Gaza, but still near the coast, west of Jerusalem. This reinforces the hand of God controlling this situation. Philip is sent to see the Eunuch, and when his mission is complete, God mysteriously whisks him away, to go serve elsewhere.

This story serves two purposes. First, in the months and years after Jesus left the Earth, we see the faith spreading outward from Jerusalem under the direction of God's hand. The teachings of Jesus were primarily embraced by Gentiles, by non-Jews. We presume that this influential Ethiopian carried his new faith back to

Africa and proceeded to introduce others to the teachings of Jesus. There is a powerful connection between seeking and spreading the faith in the Bible. The other purpose is that we are introduced to the notion of a seeker, of someone who feels drawn internally to learn about God. All of us are born this way, with the Holy Spirit within us, motivating us to seek, to learn, to become one of the faithful.

There's more to this story. The Ethiopian is a strange figure. He is from far away. He is not an ethnic Jew. The Greek term that is used, *eunouchos*, can indeed mean a castrated man. Traditionally, we have assumed that this Ethiopia had been made a eunuch so that he could be trusted around the King's harem or around the queen herself. But the word can also refer to a high court or military official. The real point is that this man is the ultimate outsider. He would certainly not fit in the Jewish culture around Jerusalem. He represents the total acceptance of all people in the eyes of Jesus Christ. Anyone, no matter how different they are, is welcomed into the fold of the faithful. Philip, as the person who brought the faith to the Samaritans, who were outcasts, and the man from Ethiopia, represent the availability of the Word of Jesus to all people in the world, no matter who they are.

There is one thing I have noticed as a hospital chaplain. When people are admitted to the hospital, they have a chance to state their religious faith. Over and

over, I have seen that the people who are most likely to identify openly as Christians are people with few assets, people who are not at all powerful in our culture. This is particularly true with young people. Economically successful older folks, people older than me, who were raised in traditional Christian denominations, like Methodism, the Lutheran Church, the Presbyterian Church, or an evangelical church, often maintain that identity and declare themselves to be Christian. Yet when you look at younger people who say they are Christians, they are far more likely to live in an apartment, not in a house that they own, and to earn a living driving for Door Dash, not as a lawyer or an engineer. Many such people are immigrants. Homeless people often tell the admission folks they are Christian.

Homeless people tend to cycle through the hospital. They don't get regular medical care, and they wait until they have a serious medical crisis, and then they go to the ER. Often bystanders call 911 or the police bring them in off the street. There is one young man who has been in the hospital in Boulder many times. I met him seven years ago, when I was doing an internship at a Boulder United Methodist church. He has a seizure disorder. The way I met him was by opening a closet at the church where I was serving; I was looking for supplies for the Sunday School. When I opened the door, I found a young man injecting himself with something. My immediate reaction was that he was using intravenous drugs. He explained

that he was just trying to stop a seizure – and he showed me the prescription bottle he was using. I told him that we had bathrooms and other rooms that he could use if he needed to give himself medicine, that he didn't need to hide in a closet to inject himself. He is very much a Christian. When he is in the hospital, he has the TV turned to the Christian channel. He always asks to have a chaplain bring him a Bible to read. I have prayed with him many times. He grew up in an abusive home, with alcoholic parents, and he left home at the age of fifteen. He has been on the street since then. He is a true seeker. He has nothing in life except his faith. No family, no home, no money, no education – nothing. But he is a very kind person who knows his Bible. He can quote the Bible better than I can.

He once told me that he prefers to sleep in parking structures in the winter. There are security guards, though, who routinely run homeless people out of these structures. He said that recently, he was wedged in a corner in a structure, trying to stay out of sight. He was sitting between an elevator shaft and a parked car, his worldly possessions strewn around him, reading a Bible – one that I had given him at the hospital. Yes, he was reading the story of the Ethiopian eunuch in Acts. That's why I picked this passage today. A security guard, an older man who was still working in his late seventies, came up to him and told him that he was very sorry, but he would have to leave. Let's call this young homeless man Jesse. Jesse

began to comply, standing up and collecting his stuff. That's when the older security guard noticed the Bible. The security guard had been a Christian as a child and as a young man but had drifted away from his faith long ago. He asked Jesse what he was reading. Then, as the security guard walked him out to the street, Jesse proceeded to tell him that God was there for everyone, even a eunuch from Ethiopia. I don't know if Jesse was able to rekindle this man's faith, but the security guard did give him something to eat and then allowed him to spend the night in another part of the structure, where the owners of the building wouldn't notice him. The guard told Jesse about his life. Jesse is a seeker. Jesse is an evangelist.

We should grow our faith and study Scripture. We must remember the connection between seeking and spreading the faith by making use of every opportunity to tell others that no matter who you are, God wants you to walk in the Kingdom of God. During advent we should remember the reason Jesus came to Earth in the first place – and that is to spread the faith. Please pray with me.

God, let us always remember that the roots of our faith are embedded within the poor, the outsiders, those who are different. Help us overcome the pressures of society to not identify as seekers and evangelists. Let us believe and let us spread the Word. Amen.