



Sunday, Nov. 22, 2020
Baptism

A God Who Flows Through Rivers
Pastor Vern Christopherson

Acts 8:26-40 NRSV

²⁶Then 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.) ²⁷So 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 ²⁸and was returning home; seated in his chariot, he was reading the prophet Isaiah. ²⁹Then the Spirit said to Philip, "Go over to this chariot and join it." ³⁰So Philip ran up to it and heard him reading the prophet Isaiah. He asked, "Do you understand what you are reading?" ³¹He replied, "How can I, unless someone guides me?" And he invited Philip to get in and sit beside 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 silent before its shearer, so he does not open his mouth. ³³In his humiliation justice was denied him. Who can describe his generation? For his life is taken away from the earth."

³⁴The eunuch asked Philip, "About whom, may I ask you, does the prophet say this, about himself or about someone else?" ³⁵Then Philip began to speak, and starting with this scripture, he proclaimed to him the good news about Jesus. ³⁶As 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?" ³⁸He commanded the chariot to stop, and both of them, Philip and the eunuch, went down into the water, and Philip baptized him. ³⁹When 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. ⁴⁰But 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.

When was the last time you weren't sure where you were going and how you were going to get there? It's not a fun feeling, is it? It can apply to anything from figuring out complicated highways in the Twin Cities, to paying off credit card debt, to deciding how to observe Thanksgiving in the midst of a raging pandemic. So, do you know where you are going and how you are going to get there?

I was asking these questions myself on November 1, All Saints Day. I was going to La Crosse to visit DeWaine Silker. I'd gotten a call from the family that DeWaine was actively dying. For the past year or so DeWaine had been living with his son David and daughter-in-law Teresa in La Crosse. As I got close to the city, I suddenly got a sick feeling in the pit of my stomach. I'd forgotten my cell phone in Rochester. I had

only an address scribbled on a piece of paper telling me where they lived. But I had no phone number and no directions on how to get there.

So now what? If you've ever been to La Crosse you know that the hills surrounding the central part of town are anything but easy to navigate. I stopped at a Kwik Trip and approached a friendly-looking cashier. "I'm a pastor," I said. "I need to visit a man who's dying. Can you help me?" The cashier went to a back room, grabbed her phone, and entered the address. She said the roads were a bit tricky, but she would try to steer me in the right direction. That said, there were hills to climb, roads that curved and curved some more, and soon I was lost – again.

I stopped at a farmhouse. A kind woman let me in. "I'm a pastor," I said. "I need to visit a man who's dying. Can you help me?" She offered to try. She said she had Google Maps on her phone but had never used it. She was roughly twice the age of the friendly cashier at the Kwik Trip. I showed her how to open Google Maps. Considering my less-than-stellar record with technology, let's just say, we were both going out on a limb.

By the time the woman entered the information, she said she was ready to talk me through the route. It went something like this: "When you get to the end of the driveway, take a left. You'll get to a stop sign, take another left. You'll eventually get to Charlie's Bar. Take a right. When you get past the elementary school, take another right. You'll go around a big bend and drive by a little park. Take a left and another left. I stopped listening. She shared that Google Maps said it would take about an hour to get there from here. My shoulders sank. I didn't have an hour to spare. DeWaine was dying.

Where was I going and how I was going to get there. I got in my car, drove to the end of the driveway and took a left. I was back on the winding road, out in the country, lost and confused. I came to the stop sign the woman had mentioned.

When all else fails, say a prayer, right? "Lord, I don't know where I'm going. Please show me the way!" The woman had told me to take a left, but just then, something inside prompted me to take a right instead. I drove over a little hill and soon spotted a sign for... McLaren Road. My heart skipped a beat. That was the road! Way to go, God!

I was able to spend some quality time with DeWaine and his family. We read scripture, and prayed, and sang quietly under our masks, "Children of the Heavenly Father." I made the sign of the cross of DeWaine's forehead, the sign he'd received in baptism. As I left, I hoped my visit had brought a sense of peace for DeWaine and the family. I know it did for me.

When was the last time you weren't sure where you were going and how you were going to get there? In our reading from Acts, an Ethiopian man is experiencing that feeling. He's returning home from a trip to Jerusalem. By all accounts, the man has a royal pedigree, and has taken an interest in the Jewish faith, and is black. And there's one more thing: he's a eunuch, a castrated male. In the eyes of Jewish law, he's considered an outcast.

The man has traveled to Jerusalem to worship. That's odd, because Deuteronomy says plainly that a eunuch is not allowed to enter the temple (Deut. 23:1). The story doesn't say if he ever finds a place to worship, but now he's heading home. He's riding in his chariot on a wilderness road. He's reading from the prophet Isaiah. Suddenly he comes across a passage that connects with him: "Like a lamb before its shearer, so he does not open his mouth. In his humiliation, justice was denied him. Who can describe his *generation*?"

The eunuch is scratching his head. Suddenly Philip – one of the twelve disciples – shows up on that wilderness road. What's he doing here? Philip comes, not as part of any grand plan, but prompted by an angel.

This story takes place sometime after Easter. Jesus has risen and the Spirit has been poured out on Jesus' followers. That's a good thing, because those followers often don't know where they're going and how they're going to get there.

Philip climbs into the chariot and sits down next to the eunuch. Think of him as a combination of the friendly Kwik Trip cashier and the kind woman in the farmhouse. He's been sent to help, to point a lost and confused soul in the right direction. He explains to the African: "This passage is about Jesus, the Lamb who suffered silently, who was not treated fairly, who had no *generation* – no family – of his own, but yet who created the largest family in the world." The eunuch's eyes got very wide: "Can I join this family? What's to prevent me from getting baptized?"

Right then, it would have been so easy for Philip to say *no*. "The Bible says no. Years of Jewish tradition say no. There's no room among God's people for someone like you." But that's not what happens. Instead, old boundaries are set aside. A Jew and an outsider, an olive-skinned man and a black-skinned man, stand side by side. On the face of it, they are worlds apart. But here's the truth: they both need Jesus. So Philip baptizes him. Easter breaks in. And now they are part of the same big family.

This is a heartwarming story, right? Well, that depends on your perspective. If you're a law-abiding, first-century Jew, you might be wondering where this story of the rabbi from Galilee is headed. The world around you is changing and you're not sure if you like it. On the other hand, if you've come to believe that Jesus is the long-awaited Messiah, crucified and risen, then even if you don't know exactly what the future holds, you give thanks because the family of Jesus has gotten just a bit bigger.

As I see it, this story from Acts speaks to the challenge of being the church after Easter. The Risen Christ is loose in the world. He's gone ahead of his followers. Questions are coming up: Is there room in the family for an Ethiopian eunuch? And if so, on what grounds? How much of the Old Testament remains in place and how much needs to be set aside? These are tough questions. Pretty soon they will get even tougher. Peter has a dream about a Gentile named Cornelius. According to the dream, he's supposed to have lunch with this guy and be open to eating whatever is set before them. Really – a roast pork sandwich with a Gentile? Oh my, where are they going and how are they going to get there?

Friends, we are a church named after a river: the Zumbro. Most of the time our river is slow and meandering and under control, but not always. In fact, controlling the Zumbro has been a major effort for downtown Rochester for any number of years. Rivers aren't always predictable, after all.

If we were looking for a patron saint, John the Baptist would probably fit the bill. After all, John was a wild, unpredictable character in the story of Jesus. His dad, Zechariah, was a priest in the temple in Jerusalem. Zechariah performed ritual cleansings as people came to the temple with their sacrifices. They needed cleansing for impurities contracted through things like menstruation, skin disease, or touching a corpse.

Many would have expected John to follow in his father's footsteps, but John had a mind of his own. He left the city for the countryside. He abandoned the ceremonial bathing pools of the temple for free-flowing rivers.

I wonder, did John know where he was going and how he was going to get there? I doubt it. He told the people to "prepare the way of the Lord." He called them to a single, dramatic baptism to symbolize a reoriented heart. John must have believed this God-movement would not be confined to the temple. In fact, the people no longer had to go to God; God was coming to them. And God, in God's relentless love, would allow no ritual or requirement to obstruct the way. They could never completely contain a God who flows through rivers. Repentance meant orienting one's life around this God. It meant repenting of the old ways that had kept so many people out.

Indeed, was there room for an Ethiopian eunuch in God's family? Sure there was. Philip baptized the eunuch in the first body of water they could find. It might have been a river or simply a puddle in the road. But in the process, Philip got out of God's way. Rachel Held Evans writes: "[Philip] remembered that what makes the gospel offensive isn't who it keeps out, but who it lets in....God had cleared a path. There was holy water everywhere."

This past summer we had a number of outdoor worship services, both on Sundays and Wednesdays. One man showed up week after week. His name was Charles Possinof. When Charles was growing up, he was often brought to Zumbro by his grandmother, Florence Lee. Now he was going through a time of soul-searching. He wasn't sure if he'd been baptized, but he wanted to be.

Gradually we found out more about Charles. He was homeless. He often slept in our Columbarium. He was also worshipping at Bethel. One Saturday night he got baptized there.

Was there room in God's family for Charles? Sure there was. Water from the Zumbro River can flow just about anywhere. We can easily get hung up with notions of who's in and who's out, who's worthy and who's not. But please hear me: there is holy water everywhere.

Friends, do you know where you are going and how you are going to get there? Seventy years ago DeWaine Silker wasn't sure. He was getting married to a woman named Norma Larson. There'd been high school sweethearts. They were getting married at Zumbro, Norma's church. But before they started on that journey, DeWaine asked to be baptized. He wanted to reorient his life. And so a pastor from Zumbro - I'm not sure which one - took some water, and spoke some words, and made the sign of the cross on DeWaine's forehead. Easter broke in. And soon afterward, DeWaine walked down the aisle with Norma and they started a life together.

Did DeWaine and Norma know where they were going and how they were going to get there? Not for a minute. And most days, we don't know either. Throw in a deadly pandemic, and a messy post-election season, and we're readily reminded that life - much like a free-flowing river - is often anything but predictable.

Keep in mind, though: there is holy water everywhere - and for everyone. And here's the truth: we all need Jesus. Our new baptismal font is twice as wide and twice as deep as our old one. I like the sound of that. That means there's plenty of room for the likes of Philip and the Ethiopian eunuch, for the likes Charles and DeWaine, for the likes of you and me.

There's no doubt in my mind: in this wild, unpredictable river of ours, there's plenty of room for all who want to be part of the great big family of God. Amen.