

Fifth Sunday of Easter
April 28, 2024
Suffering Risen Savior Jesus
Acts 8:26-40

Today the Acts of the Apostles shows us that the church is starting to get organized, and the mission of word and sacrament is being done by the Holy Spirit through the original 7 deacons of the church: Stephen, Prochorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas, Nicolaus, and today our *focus Deacon*, Philip.

And what Philip does today, most people do not realize, has its origins in King Solomon in 1 Kings 8:59-60, which tells us upon the completion of the Temple he built, “Let these words of mine, which I have pleaded before the LORD, be near to the LORD our God day and night, and may he maintain the cause of his servant and the cause of his people Israel, by which he requires, that all the peoples of the earth may know that the Lord is God; there is no other.” Solomon established the temple of the Lord as a mission to the world. And just a few decades later, the Queen of Sheba, of the Sabeans in Southern Arabia and of nearby Ethiopia traveled over 1,000 miles to come see this wonder of the World in its making.

Today in our lesson, a millennium later, a eunuch of the Queen of Ethiopia continues the tradition of worshipping with the one true God in Jerusalem. By the power of the Holy Spirit, he encounters Philip on his way home. The way that Philip starts the conversation might surprise any of us. Upon hearing the eunuch reading Isaiah, he literally says, “So, do you even know what you are reading?”

And I think that’s normal for us *know-it-all* Christians. Just the other day, I caught a tik tok of a couple of girls claiming to know how misogynistic and racist the Bible is. And the sum total of their knowledge was what happened to Adam and Eve, and even then they got that wrong. It would have been very easy for the young man debating them to be condescending to their ignorance, but he was good, pointing out a host of scripture that proved them wrong. And he did it gently and lovingly.

So even though Philip’s language can come across that way, and I think we all do this, our love should still overflow in such a way that those who disagree or misunderstand us still know we care for them.

And I believe Philip’s love did that.

For sure, the eunuch knows something, I mean, he picked a major prophet. Plus, he had to have some wisdom to be able to spend the kind of money he did to buy this scroll of Isaiah.

But, like so many of us, just reading the prophets on our own can be daunting. So, even to the properly catechized, today's section of Isaiah might have confused any one of us.

The eunuch asks one reasonable question, to which Philip accommodates him. Upon reading together, he asks an even more important question for us to consider today, "I ask you, about whom is the prophet speaking this? Concerning himself or concerning some other?"

Good Question!

Now, we have the benefit of 2,000 millennia of theological commentary to know this is about Jesus, even before we read the next verse. But what if all we had was Isaiah and the Old Testament, like Philip and the other 6 Deacons of the early church and everyone else in the New Testament did? You see, they were not reading Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. If they were lucky, they had a scroll of Isaiah in their local temple.

And we may not think about this much, but the Apostles were not reading their Acts, *they were living them*; and Luke would go on to record them afterwards under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit.

So our understanding of who Isaiah was talking about came from the Apostles as eyewitnesses of Jesus, and as to what he taught them before He ascended into heaven. Knowing that, the eunuch's question is an interesting one, and it got me thinking how often we see that question in a somewhat similar way from our perspective rather than from the perspective of Isaiah.

Do we think we are the suffering ones, ignoring Christ's suffering? If we are trying to figure out who is really suffering, and we don't look to Christ and *His* suffering, this can change our perspective on Scripture entirely. If it's not Christ suffering and it is our suffering alone, Scripture can become a series of moral tales that just helps us figure out how to relieve our suffering. Scripture can even become a god, unto itself, of holy and precious words that must be preserved above recognizing who gave it to us, and why He gave it to us. We can even see the church as a sacred space where no one is supposed to suffer, because we're supposed to follow these moral tales properly so we do not have to suffer! This perspective will kill your faith faster than Satan ever could.

But what if our focus is exactly where Isaiah's focus was? And just a few simple questions can get us there, if we consider whose suffering matters...

Do we suffer in silence?

Are we innocent blameless sheep?

Has our life been taken?

Has our Justice been denied to us?

How humble are we, actually?

Does our suffering look like a Christian suffers, or do we cry in protest while we gaslight others for the suffering, quite frankly, we deserve?

When Pastor Moore was a lieutenant in the Coast Guard and commanded a boat, he experienced an interesting incident. One of his sailors did not suffer like a sailor should and even gaslighted others for the suffering she caused herself by her inept thinking. According to his story, Pastor Moore's boat had a specific mission to track other boats using a *civilian boat*, rather than the traditionally marked boat of the Coast Guard. All part of the secret mission, I would imagine. And, because it was a civilian boat, they were permitted to adorn themselves in civilian attire when on the boat and off duty. Well, one sailor decided that her swimsuit was civilian attire, and decided to wear that when she was on the boat.

This raised eyebrows immediately. The Chief on the boat decided to film her and then share the film with a former female boot camp drill instructor in their unit, to ask her opinion about the appropriateness of the swimwear selection.

Now, you must understand, this was well over 30 years ago. But you can just imagine how any young lady would react to being taped without her permission in her beach attire, and she was way ahead of her time. Taking no responsibility for her poor choice of civilian attire, she immediately gaslighted everyone in the unit for conspiring to humiliate her and embarrass her, insisting she was the real victim in all of this.

And her remonstrations were so over the top, her language so rough before her commanding officer, and so disrespectful, that Pastor Moore finally, in exasperation, said, “No one is gonna’ listen to you if you’re acting like a jerk.” She was vulnerable in her position, and the way she was bringing her case was offensive enough to erase her somewhat valid concerns.

This is a perfect example of the way we suffer as Christians. We get so over-the-top about our suffering that we lose the point of the suffering. Ultimately our suffering should point the lost to Christ, for whom we gladly suffer, because of the ultimate suffering He submitted to on our behalf. When we’re properly focused on Christ, we cannot help but see His suffering in our place. As He serves us with the forgiveness of sins and the strengthening of our faith, so we can suffer for the sake of the Gospel, knowing our ultimate hope in everything is through Him.

Philip wasn’t suffering at all in our lesson today, and neither was the eunuch. But I imagine he and maybe the eunuch, too, if they did not suffer themselves, were caught up in witnessing the suffering of loved ones they shared their faith with. And I don’t know if they suffered righteously, most do not...none of us do...but, I do know they knew their suffering Savior and they knew why Jesus suffered and died for them. And they also knew and believed He rose for them, whether they saw Him alive or not, and they lived their lives in that faith as we see today.

Philip taught the eunuch that he needed baptism. And upon seeing the water, the eunuch stopped the chariot so Philip could baptize him, washing away his sins and sealing him as a child of his suffering, risen, savior Jesus.

AMEN

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