FIFTH SUNDAY OF EASTER

Nu’uanu Congregational Church

Jeannie D. Thompson

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*Water in the Desert* Acts 8: 26-40

This morning as I was printing out the sermon for all of you, I came across an article that says someone as unusual as the Ethiopian Eunuch is going to be baptized – Russell Brand. If you find that article, and I encourage you find that article, I could not include it in the sermon but it is very interesting because the article says very much like what I am going to say to you right now.

The book of the Bible that our story comes from—the Acts of the Apostles—these are stories of tremendous power. Not because they describe amazing and miraculous deeds, (although they do) but even more so because these deeds break down walls and bring people closer to God and to one another. What the apostles, and disciples like Philip in todays’ story—what they all do is show us what it is like to live in the wake of the resurrection.

Life is not always easy or peaceful. The acts of the apostles show us how the believers of the Way of Christ came to understand themselves and the gift they had been given. Like the Ethiopian Eunuch, they had been shown how to find life-giving water in the desert.

We begin with one man, Philip. As you may remember, there was an apostle named Philip. The man in this story was *not* one of the first apostles. He is often called, Philip the Evangelist, or Philip the Deacon because he was likely one of the “seven men of good standing,” who had been identified by the community of Christ followers. The six men identified were said to be “full of the Spirit and of wisdom” [Acts 6:3].

The apostles had asked the people to name, for themselves, such men to be in special service. The apostles then commissioned the six men to take on the task of seeing to the welfare of the people—especially that the widows and orphans were fairly treated and given their fair portion of food. These men were the first deacons in the church.

One of the things to know about these six men is that they were also given the skill to do acts of power. They were able to heal and to offer such charismatic witness to Christ that tremendous numbers of people were brought to faith.

Unfortunately, not all of the people were pleased with the message that the deacons continued to proclaim. In fact, the reason we find Philip on the road to Gaza, was because one of the deacons, Stephen, had been stoned to death after his particularly pointed sermon on the failures of the Temple officials and the people.

His words so enraged them that after Stephen was stoned, the rest of the believers were driven out of Jerusalem. (Only the twelve apostles were able to remain in the city.) This was the beginning of the persecution of the Christ followers.

Philip was one of those who were dispersed. He was led to go down to Samaria where he preached and performed many miraculous healings. He also brought many, many more people to Christ.

That is the funny thing about the persecution: it was thought that by breaking-up the community of believers, forcing them into exile throughout the region and beyond, that this would suppress, even destroy, the fledgling movement. However, instead of dampening their ardor for Christ, it gave the believers much more of an opportunity to spread the good news farther, to many new regions, and to more and more people. Many more were brought to faith because of Philip’s, and the other deacons’ and the other believers’ testimony in many far-flung places.

The road to Gaza is not as far-flung as some of the others. Still, it was in the region of the Philistines, which would have been a foreign and uneasy place for a Jewish Christ-follower to be. Even more unusual was being directed by the Spirit to minister to an Ethiopian Eunuch, but this is what happens to Philip. Fresh from Samaria, Philip is told to go to Gaza. Once there, he is directed to go and catch-up to a wealthy eunuch’s chariot.

Needless to say: the eunuch was the ultimate outsider. The Bible tells us that he was coming from Jerusalem, where he had gone to worship. This immediately makes him unusual. Further, he is described as an Ethiopian. This was the way of saying that he had dark skin—a trait that did not carry the kind of discrimination known in our time. However, it would have marked him as unusual, foreign, even exotic.

As for him being a eunuch, even a rich and powerful one, it also brought him into some contention with the faith he had come to adopt. Deuteronomy, chapter 23; the very first verse of that chapter clearly prohibits the inclusion in the community, men who have been altered in the way a eunuch is.

Simply as a foreigner, he would have had limited admittance to the Temple. He, and other foreigners were only admitted to the outer courts. As a eunuch, he would not have been allowed even in the outer courts.

Somehow, this has not dampened his desire to be a God-follower. He has even secured a copy of the Book of Isaiah which would have been very, very expensive. He is so glad to have this treasure that he has begun to read it on his way home. He is reading chapter 53, the description of the “suffering servant” who

*7 …was oppressed, and he was afflicted,
   yet he did not open his mouth;
like a lamb that is led to the slaughter,
   and like a sheep that before its shearers is silent,
   so he did not open his mouth.
8 By a perversion of justice he was taken away.
   Who could have imagined his future?
For he was cut off from the land of the living,
   stricken for the transgression of my people.*

Philip sees the Ethiopian struggling with what he was reading and is invited to join the man in his chariot. Although Isaiah had been writing about Israel as a nation coming out of exile, Philip understands Isaiah’s words in light of the good news about Jesus. He understood the passage in this way because, in the Gospel of Luke, Jesus had similarly interpreted Hebrew Scriptures in light of his own life and teachings, which were understood to be “things about himself” [24:27].

What Philip says to the Ethiopian inspires him. He seems to see an element of grace that is new and exciting to him. Whatever sins that had been committed by or against God’s people, the God Philip was telling him about was one who was transforming that sin into forgiveness and acceptance. Rather than finding ways to exclude, God was drawing people together. Instead of judging and condemning, God was offering God’s grace, was securing mercy with God’s own actions, even God’s own body.

What Philip described to the Ethiopian was that a door had been opened—one that he thought was forever closed to him. Immediately, he asks for and receives the wholeness he has sought in the waters of baptism.

The Ethiopian saw it first. He saw a pool of water in the desert—enough water to cover his body, it was enough water in which to be baptized. It was enough water to allow him to die to the life of exclusion and isolation. It was enough water to welcome even this outsider into the community as a full member worthy of recognition and fellowship.

It is unusual, but not impossible to find water in harsh, hostile environments. The Ethiopian in our story was particularly motivated to find water because of what he learned about the inclusive and grace-filled nature of Christ. He had learned that even in that dry barren landscape, God would make it possible for him to find his release, his freedom, his joy.

Our good news is that God is still making it possible for us to find deep pools of good water wherein we might find our joy, too. Like the Ethiopian, we are traveling through a harsh, inhospitable land. Therefore, it is important for us to be alert, and be attentive to where the water might be, for it might even be flowing—if only we would see it.

Many of us in this country found enough water to share with the many who longed to be washed in the waters of for equality and inclusion. Some of us found it on the Edmund Pettus bridge in Alabama. Many were savagely beaten that day in March of 1965, but a new spirit of righteousness was also witnessed by a nation and things began to change.

Such actions were not then, and are not now a popular position to take—which makes it rare, like finding water in the desert, but it is possible.

In South Africa, the pool of water that nation found was in the courage and determination of men like Nelson Mandela, and Bishop Desmond Tutu, and Steven Biko. They looked, they found, and brought justice to the whole nation. Although many suffered—almost exclusively among the black citizenry—during the years of Apartheid, the goal was reconciliation, not retribution—it was the building up of all people; by recognizing that all people are meant to thrive and live in dignity and with a sense of worth.

As for us, the pool of water we seek might even be among the hundreds of young people throughout the country who are calling for a ceasefire in Gaza; they are also standing up and demanding that the universities they are attending divest themselves of any and all financial interests they may have in arms and weapons—especially those that are sent to destroy more Palestinians.

(It is also worth noting that almost twenty years ago, a resolution from the ‘Aha Pae’aina of our Hawaii Conference of the United Church of Christ made the same demand of our national church. We sent a resolution to synod asking for the same thing, and it was passed.)

It is not easy to find water in unwelcoming environments—like the one Philip and the Eunuch knew; and like the ones we know. However, it is still worth the search—bringing relief to others, causing God’s love to flourish among thirsting, suffering people is still worth the effort. Indeed, this is what has the most probability of bringing us all a real and lasting joy.

Most of all, this water in the desert is the water of life. It was the water Philip and the Ethiopian found. It is water that is Christ himself who offers himself to us now, that we, too, might be included among those who long to be made whole.

Friends, our good news is that there is water to be found in the desert. God has seen to it. Gathering in as many people as we can, let us seek that pool of water together. Let us rejoice as more and more people are led to it and drenched by it. Let *this* be the joy with which we go on our way. Let this be so. Amen.