

## “What Is To Prevent Me...?”

Acts 8:26-40 • Psalm 22:25-31 • 1 John 4:7-21 • John 15:1-8

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I preached on the story of the Ethiopian eunuch, the first known Black Christian, on the fifth Sunday of Easter three years ago. I had thought it was a story pretty familiar to most Christians. The conversations it sparked made me realize that I was wrong; numerous people who had been Christians for decades didn't know it. A lot of you have joined us since then, and I'm going to assume that many of you don't know it either. It is a remarkable story about the spread of the Gospel across boundary lines.

There are only two human characters in this story. The first is a Christian named Philip. This is not Philip the Apostle, one of the twelve original disciples of Jesus. This is Philip the Deacon, one of the original seven Deacons who were appointed by the apostles to tend to the needs of poor Christians in Jerusalem. He had been spreading the message about Jesus in Samaria, north of Jerusalem, roughly five to ten years after the death and resurrection of Jesus, with great success. But God now has a new job for him. An angel tells him: “Get up and go toward the south to the road that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza.” This is the same Gaza that is so familiar to us from all the news, the ancient city of Gaza, a city that had already been in existence for *fifteen centuries* by that point. It had been one of the ancient strongholds of the Philistines; it was the city where the strong man Samson had died; later it had been a robust center of Greek education and philosophy. At the time of Jesus it was a prosperous city with a diverse population, administered by the Romans. There was a road leading to Gaza from Jerusalem, about 50 miles long, going down from the Judean hill country through a desert wilderness towards the Mediterranean Sea. This was the road that God sent Philip on; this is where our story takes place.

The second human character in this story is described like this: “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 and was returning home; seated in his chariot.” Okay, there are a lot of details here. There's a horse-drawn chariot, heading southwest, the same direction Philip is. Inside the chariot was an important man, a high official in a royal court, the *Ethiopian* court. Ethiopia is, of course, in Africa. If you know where Egypt is, in the northeast corner of Africa, follow the Nile River south, and you'll enter what is now called the country of Sudan. Keep going south, and follow the Blue Nile as it bends a bit to the east, and you'll enter the country called Ethiopia. You're now south of the Sahara Desert, deep into the heart of Africa. The ancient region that was called “Ethiopia” had different boundaries, and probably contained parts of Sudan as well, but you get the general idea. It was a native African kingdom. The Greeks and Romans called the people who lived there “Ethiopians,” which was a reference to the color of their skin, but they called themselves the Kingdom of Kush. It has a long and proud history; it endured for more than a thousand years; and most of us probably didn't learn *anything* about it in school. The Romans had conquered Egypt, but when they tried to conquer Kush, they failed.

I said it was called the “Kingdom” of Kush but, beginning in the second century BC, Kush was often ruled by *queens*. There was Queen Narhiqo, Queen Amanirenas, Queen Amanishakheto, Queen Shanakdakhete, Queen Nawidemak, Queen Amanitore, and several others. One of those – we’re not entirely sure which – was Queen at the time of this story. Her title was “Kandake,” or “Candace,” which technically means “queen regnant.” The Candace had her own royal court, and wielded a great deal of power and wealth. Pyramids containing the tombs of some of these queens still stand today. The African man in the chariot worked for this Candace, the Queen of Kush. He was in charge of her royal treasury – all her wealth. This was an important position, held by somebody she *deeply* trusted.

Curiously, if you do some research on artistic renderings of this story, you will find that in a number of paintings and stained glass windows, the eunuch is depicted as a white European. There is such a thing as artistic license, but there is also such a thing as *robbing a story of one of its most important points*. This man was definitely Black, and *that matters*. Christianity is crossing *racial lines*.

He was also a eunuch. Either he was deformed from birth, or (more likely) he was surgically altered to prevent the production of testosterone, to reduce his sex drive, and to make him incapable of fathering children. Eunuchs were often employed in royal courts in antiquity, particularly in women’s courts, because they were considered “safer” than the typical male. There were plenty of people in his world – and plenty of people in *ours* – who would consider him as *not really a man*. This was his most defining characteristic; the biblical story refers to him as an “Ethiopian” once and a “eunuch” *five times*.

He was also interested in the Jewish religion. He had just been to Jerusalem on a pilgrimage! How he had learned of the Jewish faith, and whether this was his first visit to Jerusalem or his twentieth, we will never know, but the Nile River and the Roman roads made it relatively easy for wealthy people like him to travel the thousand or so miles from Kush to Jerusalem and back again. But he would not have been allowed into the Jewish temple precincts in Jerusalem. There is a law in Deuteronomy 23:1 that prohibited eunuchs from entering the temple court, and there were inscriptions posted around the temple wall prohibiting access to foreigners, on pain of death. Nevertheless, the man was clearly taken with Jewish faith and practice. He was probably a “God-fearer,” ascribing to the monotheistic beliefs of the Jews and observing certain Jewish rites and traditions, without becoming a full convert to Judaism. He even owned a copy of the book of the prophet Isaiah! Those were not commonplace. Synagogues had them, but most ordinary Jews did not. A lot of people couldn’t even read! It had been copied by hand, as all books were. Had he bought it, or commissioned it, while he was in Jerusalem? We don’t know. We just know that he was reading that book, in his chariot, as he traveled down the road.

So both of these men are traveling down the road from Jerusalem to Gaza, Philip presumably on foot, and the African man in his luxurious carriage. The chariot passes Philip, and the Holy Spirit tells Philip to run up to it. In the ancient world, people read out loud, not in silence, so when Philip comes near, Philip hears the man uttering familiar words: “Like a sheep he was led to the slaughter, and like a lamb silent before its shearer, so he does 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.” Philip asks: “Do you understand what you are reading?” The man responds: “How can I, unless someone guides me?” Sensing that Philip has some wisdom to offer, he invites Philip to join him in the chariot. Thus begins a conversation between two strangers, from two different races, and from two different continents. A conversation about an ancient Jewish prophecy, about a man named Jesus, and this thing called *faith*.

Eventually, the chariot reaches a body of water. The man asks Philip: “What is to prevent me from being baptized?” Baptism was not an ordinary part of Jewish faith and practice; the topic must have already come up in their conversation. Philip had probably told the man about Jesus’ baptism in the Jordan River, and about the many Samaritans whom Philip had recently baptized. As the conversation continues, the African man starts to realize that he might be able to become part of this community of believers, even though he’s not Jewish. It is dawning on him that the dividing walls that existed in Judaism might not exist in this new faith. To be sure, he asks Philip: “What is to prevent me from being baptized?” Does the fact that I’m *not ethnically Jewish* exclude me? No. Does my *country of origin* exclude me? No. Does my *native language* exclude me? No. Does my *race* exclude me? No. Does the fact that I’m *not a “man” in the traditional sense* exclude me? No. Does the fact that I have been *sexually altered* exclude me? No. Do those *signs in the Jewish temple* exclude me? No. Do those *ritual laws in the Bible* exclude me? No. Is there *anything* that excludes me? No. Nothing at all.

So Philip and the man step down into the water together. Philip lowers him down into the water and raises him up again, baptizing him in the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit. The man rises to a new life. He is still Black. He is still African. He is still a eunuch. None of that changes. He doesn’t lose any of his *old* identities when he becomes a Christian. He just gains a *new* one.

This new Christian continues on his journey, rejoicing. Later traditions say that he returned home and shared his faith with his fellow Kushites. Tradition also gives him a name; by the end of the second century, he was being called “Simon Backos.” He was not the only evangelist to come to Africa; tradition says that Mark, the gospel writer, also went there. These and other efforts led to the creation of the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church, more than fifteen hundred years before the European colonization of Africa. The word “Tewahedo” means “United as One.” That term isn’t referring to the united Church, although the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church was one of the founding members of the World Council of Churches, to which we also belong. The word “united” refers to *Jesus*. They affirm that Jesus has *one* nature, a perfect union of both human and divine. It’s a slightly different understanding than what we Western Christians have; we affirm that Jesus is fully human and fully divine. But it’s a minor point, not worth arguing about. Today there are some 36 to 51 million members of the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church. These believers are our sisters and brothers in Christ.

There are several messages for us here. First, God clearly wanted the Gospel to spread across cultural, racial, and geographic boundaries. It was *God* who orchestrated this whole affair. God’s agency is mentioned three times in this story: God sent Philip down that road at just the right time; God told Philip to go up to the chariot; God whisked Philip away once the man had been baptized. This sequence of events didn’t happen by chance. It was the *divine will*. God *wanted* to welcome Africans to the faith.

Secondly, as we continue discussions about race, note this strong African nation in the time of Jesus, that existed entirely on its own merits, and did a fine job keeping the Romans at bay. It was rich, powerful, and smart. They had art, architecture, and literacy. Do not assume that nothing important was happening south of the Sahara way back then just because you didn’t learn about it in school.

Finally, be ready to talk about Jesus with people who are curious about the faith, even if those people are *very* different from you. A lot of people just need a *guide*. That guide might be *you*.

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