

## SERMON

May the words of my mouth and the meditations in our hearts please you, O Lord.

=====

Phillip was drawn to an unnamed Ethiopian by the Spirit of God. After preaching and witnessing to this man, Phillip baptizes him.

There are also numerous divine references in this story,

- encountering an Ethiopian (or anyone for that matter) on a wilderness desert road at mid-day,
- the sudden appearance and disappearance of Phillip,
- references to the Spirit speaking.

These show the movement of the Gospel was **and is still** divinely sanctioned.

The fact that a body of water just emerges alongside a wilderness road in the desert tells us the baptism is ordained by God.

But the Ethiopian in our story has a mixed status.

On the one hand, he is in an enviable position. He is a court official of the Candace, the name given to the Queen of Meroe on the Upper Nile. This is a position of great power and influence. He can travel, has a chariot (or wagon), possesses a scroll of Isaiah written in Greek, and is literate.

On the other hand, he is an “other,” an outsider. Various ancient writers depict Ethiopia as the “end of the world.” Romans consider Ethiopians less than, living in the margins of the world. The Jews consider eunuchs as marginal to God’s people. The fact he went to Jerusalem to worship and was reading scripture indicates his interest in Israel’s religion, but as a eunuch he could not be a Jew nor a follower of Judaism. He might be allowed to worship in the temple, but only in the outer courts with the Gentiles.

Separated. Isolated. Othered.

We have people like this in our society. In our community. And maybe in our families.

Consider how we treat the poor, the unsheltered, those suffering from food insecurity. We feed them, once a month, but we fear them. We invite them into our worship space, but we won’t eat with them. We share from our abundance, but not at the expense of our own comfort.

Consider how we treat our LGBTQIA siblings. We welcome them to worship in the ELCA as if it’s our invitation to give. We signed a paper saying we would be an RIC church. I assure you this paper is not for the benefit of our LGBTQIA siblings, it is for us. As a reminder to all of us that our faith comes from God. And therefore, the invitation to worship comes from God.

We see this in scripture, in our Gospels, even in our psalm this morning. All the nations are called to praise and serve the LORD (v27-8). All the living and the dead, the born and the unborn are all expected to serve the LORD (v29-31). All genders, binary and non-binary, queer and straight are all called to praise and serve the LORD.

Our faith comes from God, not the ELCA or any other human religious organization. Most of us here have decided to live out our faith as Lutherans and that's fine, but I don't believe that God has a denomination.

Consider how we seem to value black and brown skin less than white skin. Think about this in light of the baptism of the Ethiopian eunuch.

Church tradition says this man, this eunuch, this outsider, became the first Christian missionary to Africa. Truly God is at work here!

Imagine how much poorer our faith would be without accepting people in the margins; people we consider outside our boundaries.

Jesus tells us in our Gospel reading this morning that He is the vine; we are the branches and God the Creator is the vine-grower.

As with the sheep and the sheep fold, the vine is an important symbol for Israel in the OT. The vine represents Israel with God as the vine-grower, who tends it carefully. Pruning when necessary.

Any gardener will tell you that pruning is an important part of taking care of the garden. Pruning cuts off dead branches to make room for new growth. Pruning may also cut back live branches to promote flowering and fruit bearing.

In the Gospel according to John, the vine functions as a major symbol for the church, with emphasis on the vital interdependence between the vine, the branches, and the vine-grower (Jesus, us, and God). There is a relationship here.

Jesus also says that we should abide in Him as He abides in us. We read from 1 John.

<sup>16b</sup>God is Love, and those who abide in Love abide in God, and God abides in them.

We Love God because God Loved us first. We show our Love to God by Loving others.

I look at pruning as a way for us to die to sin so that we may bear fruit and be more alive in Christ. I do not see pruning as a way of getting rid of the unfaithful or punishing the non-believers.

The Gospel of John was written late in the first century to a people clinging to their faith.

- People persecuted by the religious majority.
- People living in the margins.
- People in need of support and encouraging words.

It was more likely a book intended to inspire members of the community to maintain their belief during a troubled time rather than to convert outsiders.

John presents the Christian belief that in Jesus, God entered into human history to save human beings.

That the divine Word became truly human was necessary for God to renew humanity. Since humanity is new in Christ, new possibilities are available in human relations to Love one another.

God does the pruning! We do the Loving and accepting. God is God and we are not.

We are not to judge; we are to serve.

We are not to exclude; we are to Love.

We pull the corners and edges of God's tent so that all are included; all are sheltered.

We can invite people to share their worship experience with us, and we should invite people to share their worship experience with us, but remember God invites them to worship. Our faith comes from God.

The message of the Gospel is Love. The message of 1 John is Love. I would argue that the message of the Bible is Love.

Love among believers imitates God's Love.

And God's Love is continued wherever believers Love one another.

God is Love and God will deal Lovingly with God's children.

**AMEN**

## NOTES AND FOOTNOTES

First Reading: Acts 8:26-40 (an Ethiopian Eunuch)

It's interesting to me that the Eunuch was confused by reading Isaiah. It must be because the Gospel of John hadn't been written yet. / Various ancient writers depict Ethiopia as the "end of the world" and its inhabitants as handsome people. The eunuch, being in the Queen's court was in a position of power. The fact he went to Jerusalem to worship and was reading scripture indicates his interest in Israel's religion, but as a eunuch could not be a Jew nor a follower of Judaism. Later stories indicate that he was the first Christian missionary to Africa, but Luke says nothing of this. <sup>1</sup> / The Ethiopian has a mixed status. On one hand, he is in an enviable position, can travel, has a chariot (or wagon), possesses a scroll of Isaiah in Greek, and is literate. On the other hand, he is an "other," an outsider. Romans consider Ethiopians less than, living in the margins of the world. The Jews consider the eunuch as marginal to God's people, and his dark skin adds to his "otherness." There are also numerous divine references; water just appearing in the desert, encountering an Ethiopian (or anyone) on a wilderness road at mid-day, the sudden appearance and disappearance of Phillip, references to the Spirit speaking. These show the movement of the Gospel was and is still divinely sanctioned. <sup>2</sup> / .<sup>3</sup>

Psalm: Psalm 22:25-31 ()

Our faith comes from God v25. / All the nations are called to praise and serve the LORD v27-8. All those living and dead, born and unborn are expected to serve the LORD v29-31. <sup>1</sup> / First part of psalm (v1-21) begin in lament, then a sudden change happens. Many wonder if the psalmist received a promise of help, or received actual help, or perhaps a shift in perception. What is clear is that in some way the deliverance of the Lord has become real to the psalmist. The second part of the (v21-31) changes to a song of praise. <sup>2</sup> / .<sup>3</sup>

Second Reading: 1 John 4:7-21 (God is Love)

We Love God because God Loved us first and because we Love God we Love others as well. / .<sup>1</sup> / The message is Love (v7-18). 1 John and the Gospel of John seem to have the opposite effect. The Gospel of John tells of Jesus divinity to those who saw Jesus only as human where 1 John tells of Jesus' humanity to those who saw Jesus only as divine. That the divine Word took on humanity (became truly human) is necessary for Him to renew humanity. Precisely since humanity is new in Christ, new possibilities are available in human relations. This is show in v7-18 to Love one another. Love among believers imitates God's Love reflected in the sending of the Son in human flesh. This act was a Loving act of sacrifice. God's Love that was manifest in the sending of the Son is continued wherever believers Love one another. Christology and ethics are connected [but to believe this connection is exclusive is arrogance and harkens to Christian nationalism]. <sup>2</sup> / .<sup>3</sup>

Gospel: John 15:1-8 (Jesus the true vine)

Confusing metaphor about pruning vines and the phrasing indicating Jesus is the ONLY way. / Chapters 15-7 seem to have been added later to emphasize themes found in chapters 13-4. The OT reference to the vine is a metaphor for Israel with God as the vine-grower, who tends it carefully, but burns and destroys it when it becomes unfaithful (an image of a vengeful God). We abide in Jesus to 1) bear much fruit and 2) to abide in His Love by keeping His commandments to Love one another. <sup>1</sup> / As with the sheep and the sheep fold, the vine is an important symbol for Israel in the OT. In John, the vine functions as a major symbol for the church, with emphasis on the vital interdependence between vine, branches, and vine-grower. Pruning promotes new growth. Pruning cuts of dead branches [die to sin] as well as cutting back some live ones to promote new, fruit bearing growth. <sup>2</sup> / .<sup>3</sup>

1. NRSV Harper Collins Study Bible, 2. NIB One Volume Commentary, 3. Sundays and Seasons

## WELCOME AND GREETING

Good Morning!

Welcome to Gethsemane! We're so glad you're here.

We are using Setting 3 in the ELW. We will start with the Thanksgiving for Baptism loosely following the format on page 97. The important thing to remember is that you have a part that is listed in your bulletin.

When you hear me say; "Look Here is Water."

You reply "Here is our water of Life! Alleluia!"

Please note that we live stream the service. During communion the live streaming is paused for privacy concerns. Children are able to use the front pew during the Children's Sermon to avoid being on camera.

I need **2 volunteers** for the offertory.

I invite you now to close your eyes and take a deep breath and let it out slowly as we prepare ourselves for worship and listen to Gary's prelude.

=====

Announcements:

No Adult Christian Ed today.

We are trying to organize some ride sharing. If you would like a ride to Gethsemane or if you can provide a ride for someone – either one – please contact the church office. We will coordinate and match riders to drivers by geography.

=====