

Asking Great Questions

The book known as Acts is full of dramatic scenes besides the description of the arrival of the Holy Spirit. Although the accounts recorded in these passages describe the events and actions of the first disciples as they began the work which their risen and ascended Lord had assigned them, many of their actions seem to be unplanned and catch them by surprise...especially in the first chapters. In the passage before us this morning there are many of those surprising elements which are orchestrated by the very active movement of the Holy Spirit. As chapter 8 begins Phillip has been preaching in Samaria with some success to the surprise of Peter and John who joined him there. Our passage begins with the appearance of a messenger of the Lord giving Phillip a new assignment: "to get up and go toward the south to the road that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza." We are familiar with Jerusalem as the home of the Temple and a central place where the disciples were gathered; we are familiar with Gaza as a modern day place of turmoil and conflict because of conflicts with Palestinians. But to the readers of Acts, this would have also carried some specific information about the type of road Philip would be traveling...Geographically one always goes up or down from Jerusalem due to its location as among the highest cities in the land; but Luke wants his readers to know that this assignment is going to take Philip on a "wilderness road", one that is far from the safest route one might take upon leaving the sacred city of the Jews. Without comment, Philip "got up and went". When given the instruction the messenger did not bother to tell Philip just what he was supposed to do on this wild road which cut through the western deserts of Israel. But like all those early disciples whose stories are recorded, Philip was sensitive and aware to the presence and movement of the Spirit. He did not question the route or the why, he just went as directed. When Philip arrives on this wilderness road he sees a chariot and is again prompted by the Spirit to go over to it, to this specific chariot. Philip responds to this prompting by running up to the chariot and as he does he hears the occupant of the chariot reading from the scroll of the prophet Isaiah; not only is the occupant reading from Isaiah but the text is one that the early church specifically understood to refer to Christ as the suffering servant. I have skipped over the portion of our passage which explains the identity of the chariot's occupant, this high ranking Ethiopian official of the court of Queen Candace; the details of his being in charge of the treasury might shed light on the very odd detail of how he could have a scroll which was a rare item and even be able to read it, but the passage does not address exactly why this Ethiopian eunuch had journeyed to Jerusalem. The assumption is that it was for a religious pilgrimage. The passage does tell us he was returning home. His nationality triggers connections with historical connections between Israel and the people of Ethiopia and promised found in Isaiah, and thus another connection to the scroll he is reading. But the fact that he is an eunuch means that he would not have been acceptable as a worshiping member in the assembly in Jerusalem as he was a "mutilated man". Whatever his acceptance may or may not have been in Jerusalem, this man has performed whatever religious duty to worship in Jerusalem that has been afforded him and is now homeward bound. Here it seems that the Spirit has found the Ethiopian long before Philip has arrived. Philip was sent to meet him on the road to Gaza. We should notice first that God sends a messenger who already knows God to seek one who is seeking God. This is a recurring pattern revealed in scripture: those who are called and claimed are then sent to call others. Do we need to pay more attention to this order

of things...are we meant to be more proactive in seeking out those who need to hear our witness to what we know of God? God sends Philip to meet with this unnamed eunuch and when Philip comes near him and realizes what he is reading, Philip asks: "Do you understand what you are reading?" To which the eunuch replied: "How can I, unless someone guides me." We seem to be living in a time when there is a great deal of seeking for answers, but not a lot of careful selection for the source of guidance. The basic drive of the human spirit seems to be to ask: what is the meaning of this or that. Even those who deny there is meaning in life, spend time exploring this question, often commenting on the fact that they believe there is no meaning; which ironically by this activity have demonstrated that there is a drive to ask the question and seek the answer. This activity illustrates or suggests some meaning system even if in their efforts they haven't been able to define it. Questions are the stuff of life. The problems come with asking the right questions, and then seeking out the right guidance for answering them. Of course, in a time of crisis it is easy to hang onto ideas that feel good, but often in the end will not satisfy. In times of crisis, we are often offered many facile answers. Rather than honoring skepticism as a motivation for deeper insight, some would offer beliefs that suggest doubt is not a part of learning. Others take skepticism and move it toward nihilism, a total concentration on self-interest where only one's self counts; that it is a dog eat dog world and the winner is the one who comes out on top. In the face of questions we can get attached to partial answers which leave things the way they are or traditions that are not growing. In the face of questions which challenge the ways in which we are comfortable, we can stop seeking answers or even asking the questions. We live in a time which is like the time of this scripture. It was, and it is now, a time of seeking...a time of change. We live in a time that has radically changed the nature of what is truth. Old theories, belief systems and traditions are no longer sufficient or satisfying for many. So many who are seeking are not finding answers that satisfy the hunger they have. What message does this passage have for us in our time and place? It tells us that God wants us to seek the answers to our questions. We learn through this text that questions are welcomed, and need to be continually asked. Doubt is needed as a part of genuine faith. It also demonstrates that community is needed as it is in a learning community that our faith is expanded. For faith is nurtured in community, in the symbols and rituals shown as Philip used the Isaiah tradition to make sense of the story of Jesus and then baptized the eunuch into the community who then went away rejoicing. Being nurtured in faith is a life long process—because life doesn't stop giving us questions to answer. Our text from John's gospel gives us a grounding for that journey. In its metaphor of vine keeping we are reminded that a good wine comes from the fruit of healthy vines—vines kept that way by pruning. This reminds us that some canes need to be shaped, like some ideas or traditions that no longer work. Like the vine faith is a growing, changing process. It demands thinking and reflection so that we can prune without harm to the vine—to let go of that which does not improve the fruit and lead to a better vintage. The image of being part of the vine also gives us the confidence and comfort to risk. As branches of the vine we are part of something much greater and more beautiful

than ourselves. When we let that vine nourish us, we will let go and become part of God's vision and dream. This is the image of the divine life being in us and working through us. It is to remember that attachment to the divine life through ritual and worship sustains us. God flows through us and takes our love to a higher level. God sends us out to be those who stand with those who are seeking, for we too are seekers. Because we know this is a life project, because we seek more insight, a closer relationship we can stand easily with ambiguity and complexity of questions. Knowing deep in our being that we are chosen, loved by the divine life, we can be like Philip, we can listen and respond; we can get up and go. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.